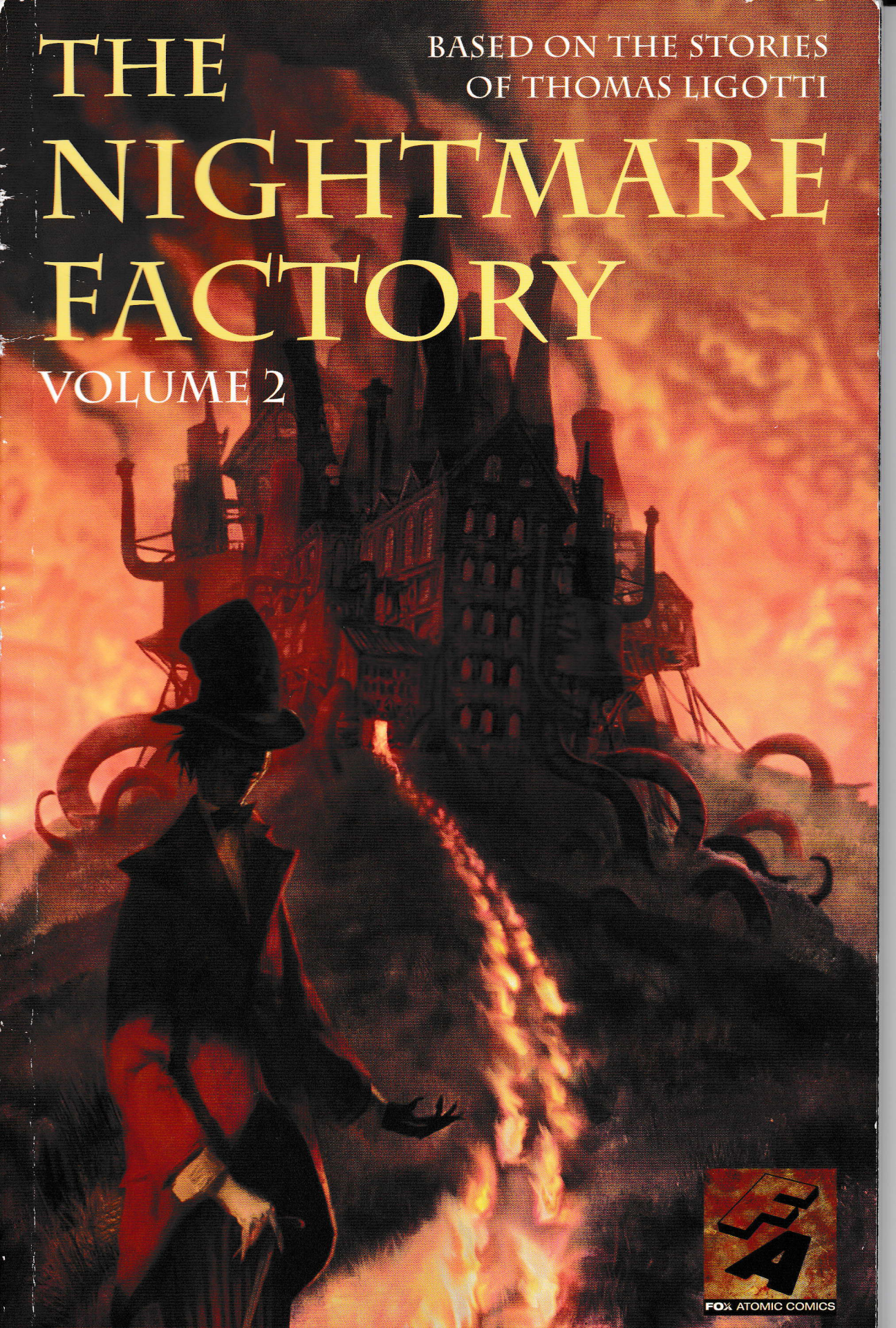
THE NIGHTMARE FACTORY

BASED ON THE STORIES OF THOMAS LIGOTTI

VOLUME 2



FOX ATOMIC COMICS

THE NIGHTMARE FACTORY

VOLUME 2

BASED ON THE STORIES OF

Thomas Ligotti

THE NIGHT FACTO

Cover by Jon Foster

Lettered by Comicraft

Design by Symon Chow

Edited by

Heidi MacDonald

R. Eric Lieb

VOLUME

MARE RY

GAS STATION CARNIVALS

Written by Joe Harris

Art by Vasilis Lolos

THE CLOWN PUPPET

Written by Joe Harris

Art by Bill Sienkiewicz

THE CHYMIST

Written by Stuart Moore

Art by Toby Cypress

Colored by Rico Renzi

THE SECT OF THE IDIOT

Written by Stuart Moore

Art by Nick Stakal

Colored by Lee Loughridge

Introductions by THOMAS LIGOTTI

FOX ATOMIC COMICS

EDITOR IN CHIEF

R. Eric Lieb

EDITOR

Heidi MacDonald

DESIGNER

Symon Chow

SPECIAL THANKS

Thomas Ligotti, Peter Rice, Debbie Liebling, Tim Bradstreet, Jimmy Palmiotti, Hope Innelli, Jeremy Cesarec, Michael Shlain, Mark Chiarello, Becky Cloonan, Ben McCool, Eric Knight, and Francesca Mannoni

The Nightmare Factory Volume 2

Fox Atomic Comics

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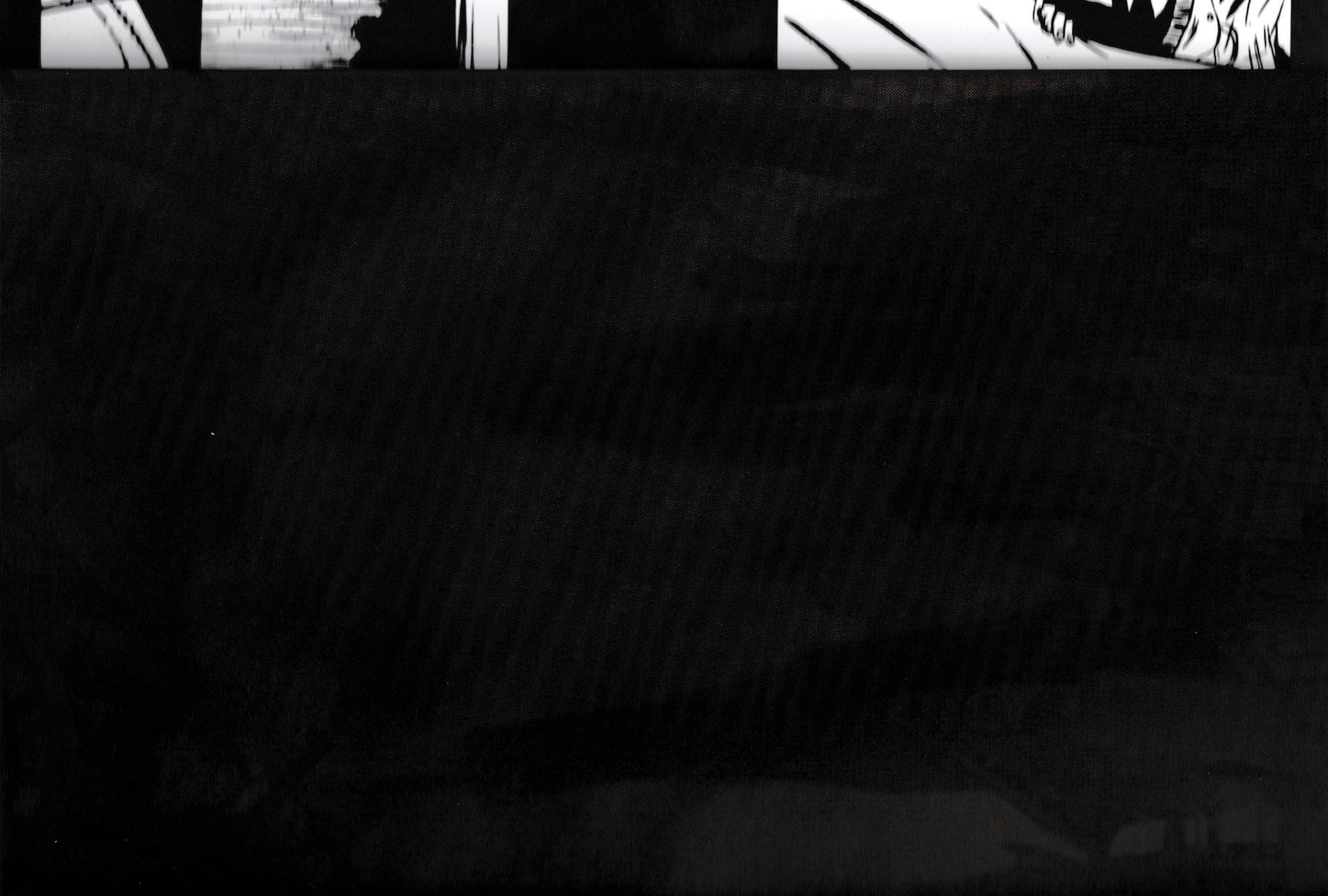
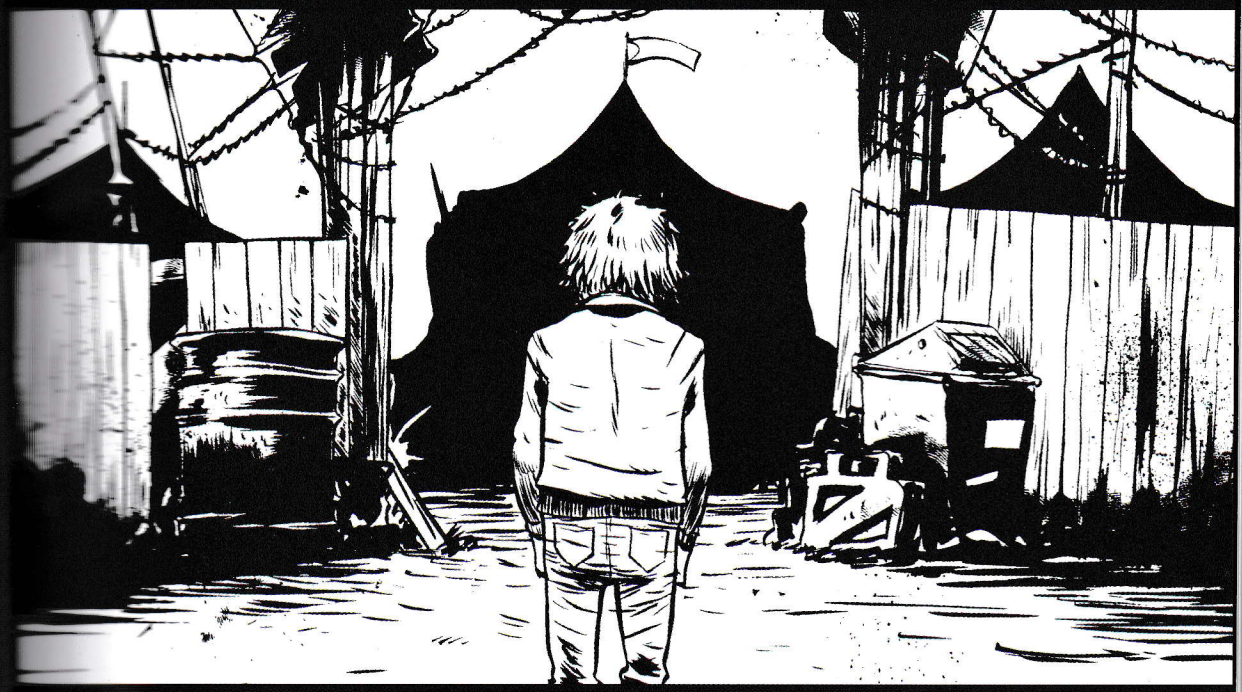
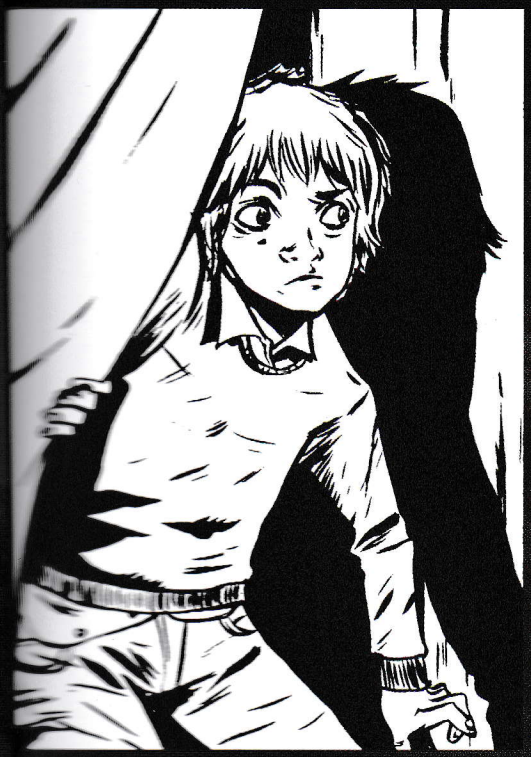
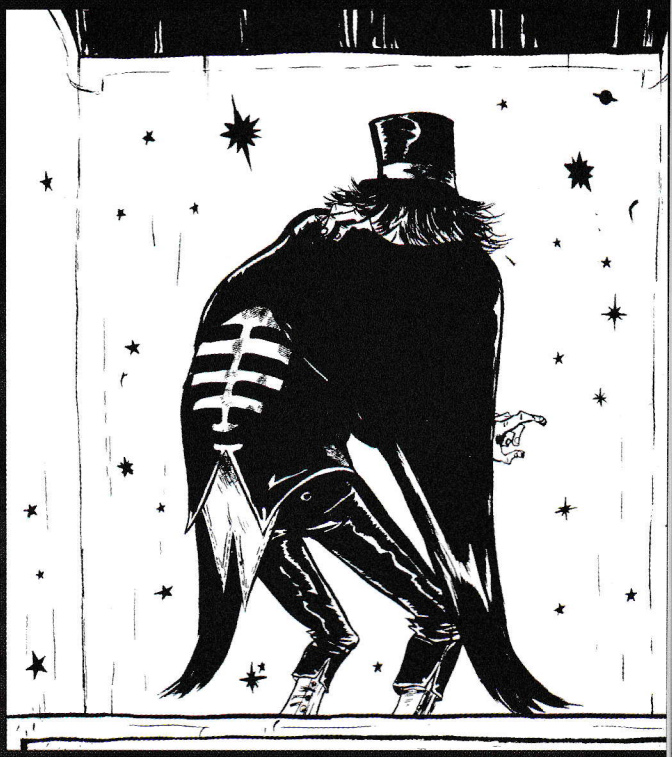




GAS STATION CARNIVALS





Introduction

Having a head full of false memories and delusions is a condition of being human. One travels down an old road and finds that things are not the way they were remembered to be. How could they have been so reconfigured? The answer, of course, is that they have not changed a bit. The only rearranging that ever takes place is in one's head, where plenty of peculiar things conspire to change our perceptions all the time.

Most prevalent among our deformed recollections are memories of places that now seem so much smaller than they were when we first encountered them. Other places are found not to be as fun as once imagined. But the prize mischief that our heads play on us is to create memories of sites that never existed and activities that never occurred.

In the old days and in primitive societies such oddities were explained away with what is called "magical thinking." Prescientific people often came up with wild explanations for things they did not understand and others around them tended to believe these preposterous explanations. Just because a man could no longer get an erection did not mean that a spell had been cast upon him, although that made for a good excuse.

By contrast, in modern cultures magical thinking is reserved primarily for the most superstitious among us or those with psychological issues. A superstitious person who wins the lottery after having bought a ticket with his pants accidentally unzipped may purposely unzip his pants each and every time he purchases a future lottery ticket or is wishing for a lucky outcome of some sort, as if that random circumstance is somehow going to impact upon his fortune again. Magical thinking today might also be exhibited by individuals with an obsessive-compulsive disorder who fear that something awful will happen if they do not wash their hands a certain number of times, so they repeatedly engage in this activity in the belief it will preserve their well being or luck.

In supernatural horror stories, however, magical thinking is a completely different matter. Those characters contending with what seems to be the work of magic will deny till the very last moment that anything magical is going on. They will invoke reason and evidence and seek out corroborations for the cause of their problems.

But readers of these stories are rarely, if ever, on the side of these characters. They desperately want to believe that there is indeed something magical going on and they are primed to accept it whenever it occurs. Some readers especially enjoy a story with bad magic, as it assures them that magic is confined to fiction and will not leak into their real lives. This is the most perverse form of magical thinking and the one least likely to be recognized as such. It is like a false memory that, despite all indications to the contrary, cannot be believed to have happened, especially if it is so innocuous as the recollection of childhood visits to a gas station carnival.

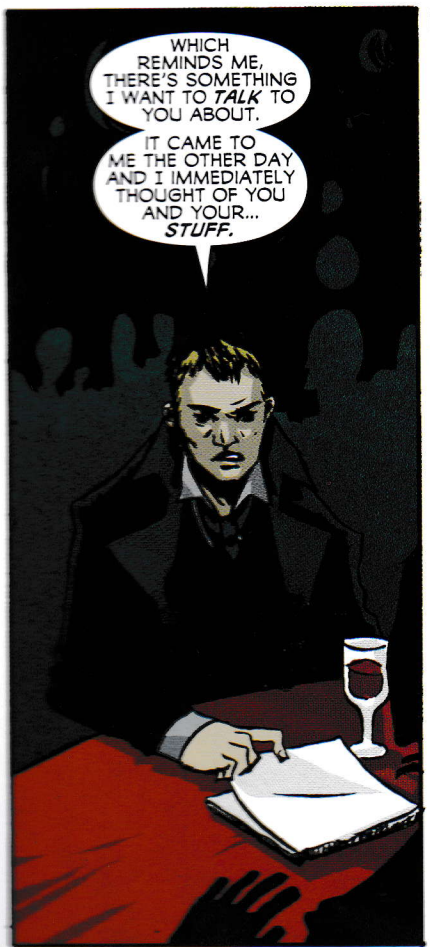
—J.L.

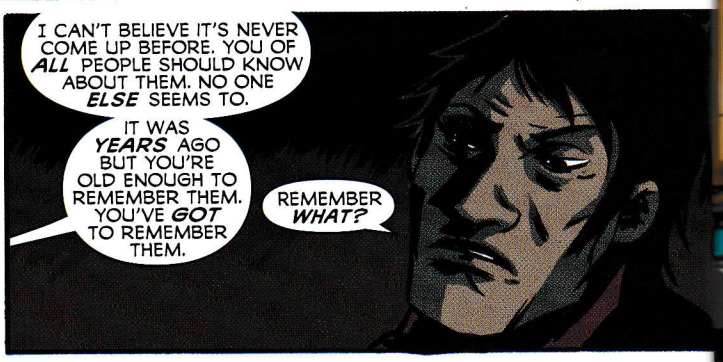
OUTSIDE THE WALLS OF THE CRIMSON CABARET WAS A WORLD OF RAIN AND DARKNESS.
INSIDE IT WAS ALL AMBER LIGHT, TOBACCO SMOKE, AND THE SOUND OF RAINDROPS HITTING THE WINDOWS, WHICH WERE ALL PAINTED BLACK.
AS I SAT AT ONE OF THE TABLES IN THAT DRAB LITTLE PLACE, I WAS ALWAYS FILLED WITH AN INFERNAL MERRIMENT, AS IF I WERE WAITING OUT THE APOCALYPSE AND COULD NOT CARE LESS ABOUT IT.
I THOUGHT OF MYSELF AS OCCUPYING A WAITING ROOM FOR THE ABYSS–
–WHICH OF COURSE WAS EXACTLY WHAT I WAS DOING–
–AND I SMILED SADLY AND TOUCHED THE FRONT POCKET OF MY COAT WHERE I KEPT MY IMAGINARY TICKET TO OBLIVION.
CRIMSON CABARET

HOWEVER, ON THIS PARTICULAR RAINY NIGHT I WAS NOT FEELING VERY WELL.
MY STOMACH WAS SLIGHTLY QUEASY, AS IF SIGNALING THE ONSET OF A VIRUS OR EVEN FOOD POISONING.
ANOTHER SOURCE OF MY MALAISE MIGHT WELL HAVE BEEN MY LONG STANDING NERVOUS CONDITION, WHICH FLUCTUATED FROM DAY TO DAY BUT WAS ALWAYS WITH ME IN SOME FORM AND MANIFESTED ITSELF IN A VARIETY OF SYMPTOMS BOTH PHYSICAL AND PSYCHIC.
I WAS, IN FACT, EXPERIENCING A FAINT SENSATION OF PANIC...
SO NOW IT'S MINT TEA.
I'M SURPRISED YOU'RE SHOWING YOUR FACE AROUND HERE.
I THOUGHT I MIGHT TRY AND MAKE UP WITH THE OLD CRIMSON WOMAN.
MAKE UP? THAT DOESN'T SOUND LIKE YOU.

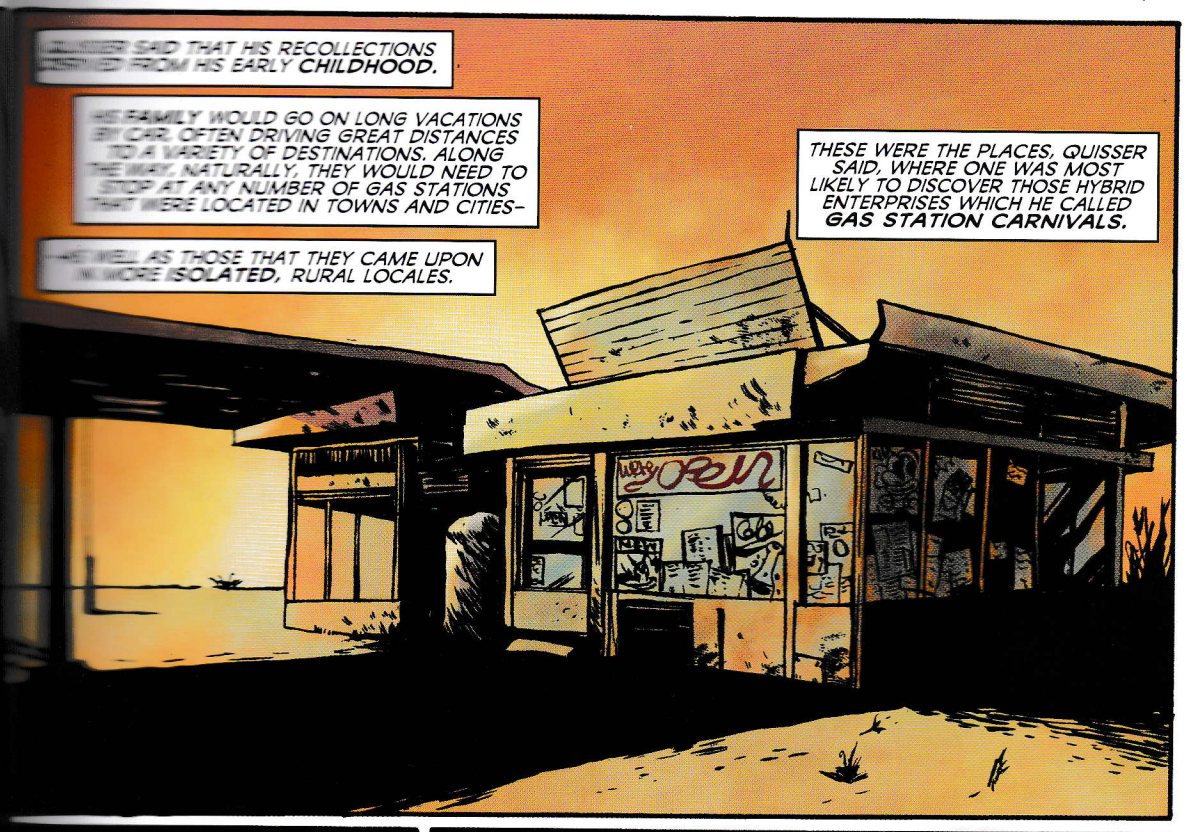
NEVERTHELESS... HAVE YOU SEEN HER TONIGHT?
NO, I HAVEN'T. YOU HUMILIATED HER AT THAT PARTY. I HAVEN'T SEEN HER SINCE, NOT EVEN IN HER OWN CLUB.
I DON'T KNOW IF YOU'RE AWARE OF THIS, BUT SHE'S NOT SOMEONE YOU WANT TO HAVE AS AN ENEMY. SHE HAS CONNECTIONS YOU KNOW ABSOLUTELY NOTHING ABOUT.
AND OF COURSE YOU KNOW ALL ABOUT IT. I'VE READ YOUR STORIES.
YOU'RE A CONFESSED PARANOID, SO WHAT'S YOUR POINT?
I HAD TOO MUCH TO DRINK, THAT'S ALL.
MY POINT IS THAT THERE'S HELL IN EVERY HANDSHAKE... NEVER MIND AN OUTRIGHT AND HUMILIATING INSULT.
YOU CALLED HER A "DELUDED NO-TALENT"!
I HAPPEN TO KNOW THAT OUR WAITRESS IS VERY LOYAL TO THE CRIMSON WOMAN. SHE WILL PROBABLY INFORM HER ABOUT MY VISITING THE CLUB TONIGHT.
I WONDER IF SHE WOULD BE WILLING TO ACT AS A GO-BETWEEN WITH HER BOSS AND DELIVER A SECOND-HAND APOLOGY FROM ME.
THIS IS MORE SERIOUS THAN I THOUGHT. SHE'S TAKEN DOWN ALL HER OLD PAINTINGS AND THE NEW ONES DON'T LOOK LIKE HER WORK AT ALL.
THEY'RE NOT. YOU HUMILIATED HER.
AND YET SHE SEEMS TO HAVE DONE UP THE STAGE SINCE I LAST SAW IT. NEW PAINT JOB OR SOMETHING.

THE STAGE TO WHICH QUISSER REFERRED WAS A SMALL PLATFORM IN THE OPPOSITE CORNER OF THE CLUB.
VARIOUS EVENTS OCCURRED ON THIS STAGE: POETRY READINGS, TABLEAUX VIVANTS, PLAYLETS OF SUNDRY TYPES, PUPPET SHOWS, ARTISTIC SLIDESHOWS, MUSICAL PERFORMANCES AND SO ON...
THAT NIGHT, WHICH WAS A TUESDAY, THE STAGE WAS DARK.

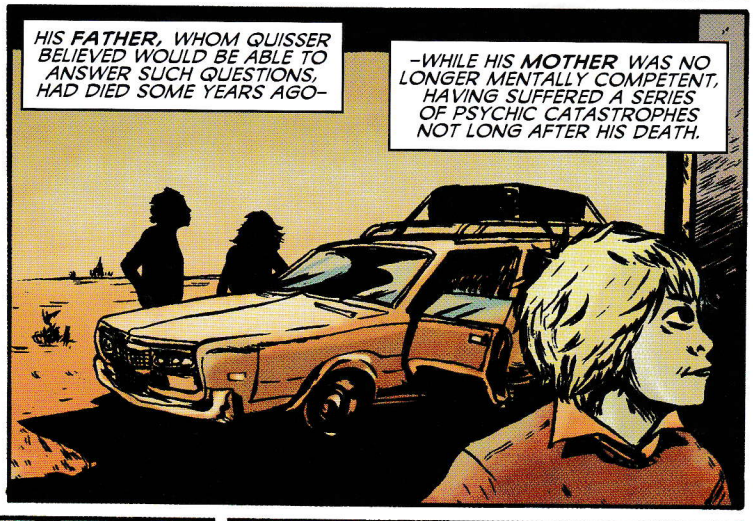

WHICH REMINDS ME, THERE'S SOMETHING I WANT TO TALK TO YOU ABOUT.
IT CAME TO ME THE OTHER DAY AND I IMMEDIATELY THOUGHT OF YOU AND YOUR... STUFF.

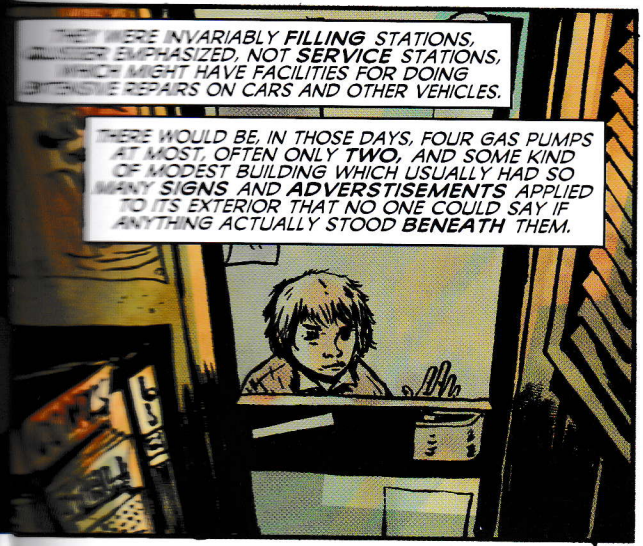

I CAN'T BELIEVE IT'S NEVER COME UP BEFORE. YOU OF ALL PEOPLE SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THEM. NO ONE ELSE SEEMS TO.
IT WAS YEARS AGO BUT YOU'RE OLD ENOUGH TO REMEMBER THEM. YOU'VE GOT TO REMEMBER THEM.
REMEMBER WHAT?

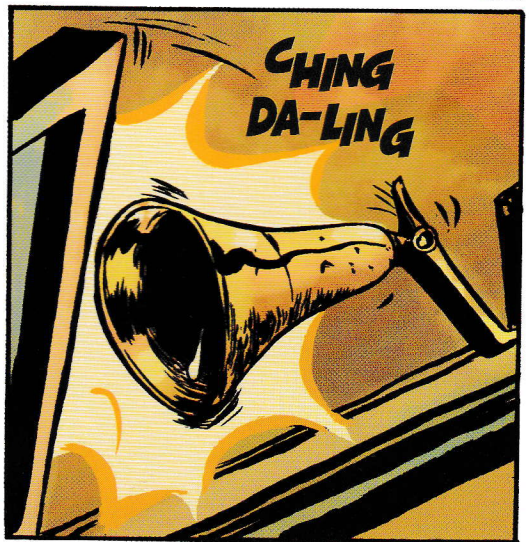
THE GAS STATION CARNIVALS.


QUISSER SAID THAT HIS RECOLLECTIONS DATED FROM HIS EARLY **CHILDHOOD.**
HIS **FAMILY** WOULD GO ON LONG VACATIONS BY CAR, OFTEN DRIVING GREAT DISTANCES TO A VARIETY OF DESTINATIONS. ALONG THE WAY, NATURALLY, THEY WOULD NEED TO STOP AT ANY NUMBER OF GAS STATIONS THAT WERE LOCATED IN TOWNS AND CITIES–
–AS WELL AS THOSE THAT THEY CAME UPON IN MORE **ISOLATED,** RURAL LOCALES.
THESE WERE THE PLACES, QUISSER SAID, WHERE ONE WAS MOST LIKELY TO DISCOVER THOSE HYBRID ENTERPRISES WHICH HE CALLED **GAS STATION CARNIVALS.**

QUISSER DID NOT CLAIM TO KNOW WHEN THESE SPECIALIZED **CARNIVALS** CAME INTO EXISTENCE, NOR HOW WIDESPREAD THEY MIGHT HAVE BEEN.


HIS **FATHER,** WHOM QUISSER BELIEVED WOULD BE ABLE TO ANSWER SUCH QUESTIONS, HAD DIED SOME YEARS AGO–
–WHILE HIS **MOTHER** WAS NO LONGER MENTALLY COMPETENT, HAVING SUFFERED A SERIES OF PSYCHIC CATASTROPHES NOT LONG AFTER HIS DEATH.


THEY WERE INVARIABLY **FILLING** STATIONS, QUISSER EMPHASIZED, NOT **SERVICE** STATIONS, WHICH MIGHT HAVE FACILITIES FOR DOING EXTENSIVE REPAIRS ON CARS AND OTHER VEHICLES.
THERE WOULD BE, IN THOSE DAYS, FOUR GAS PUMPS AT MOST, OFTEN ONLY **TWO,** AND SOME KIND OF MODEST BUILDING WHICH USUALLY HAD SO MANY **SIGNS** AND **ADVERSTISEMENTS** APPLIED TO ITS EXTERIOR THAT NO ONE COULD SAY IF ANYTHING ACTUALLY STOOD **BENEATH** THEM.

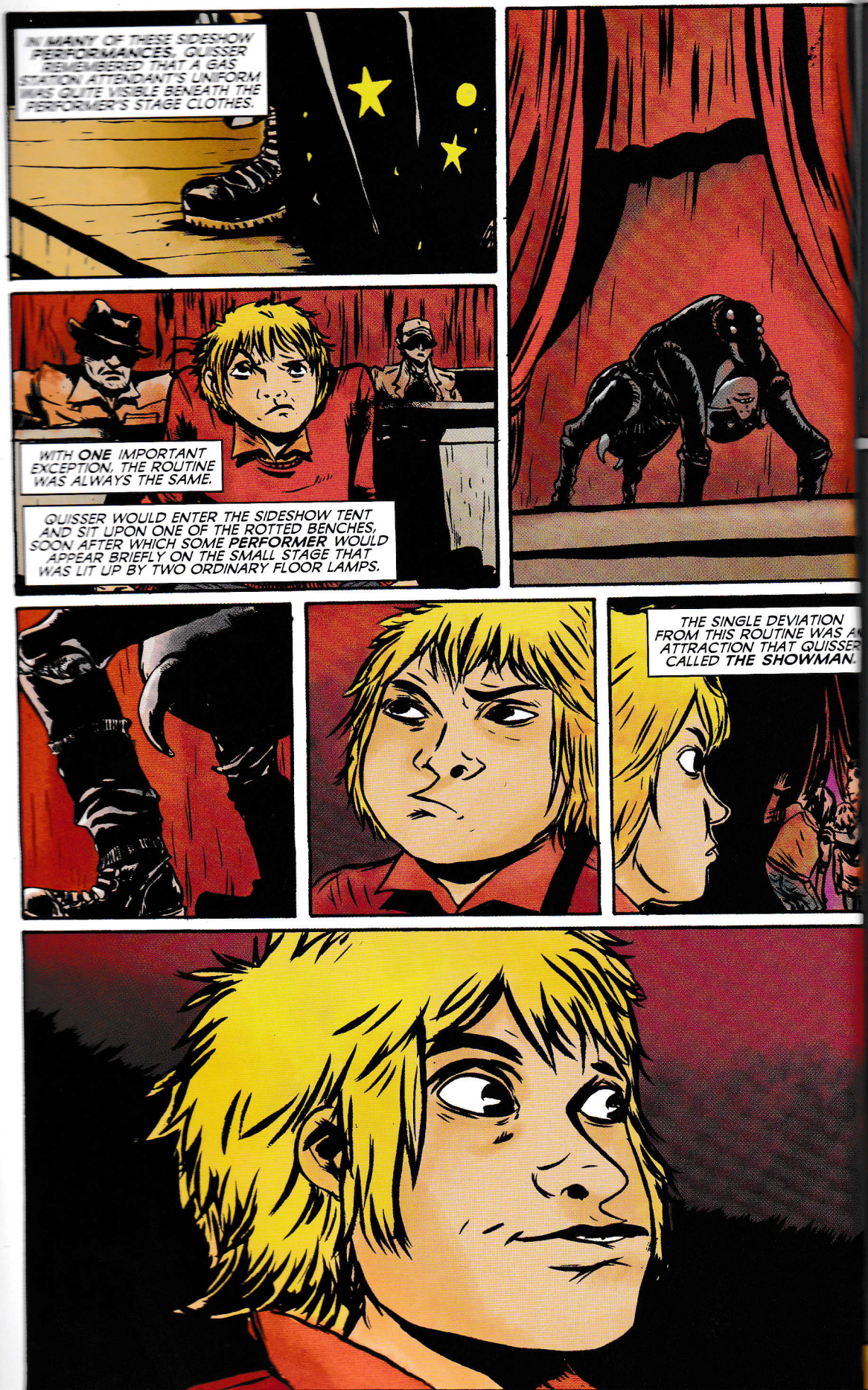

CHING
DA-LING

IT SEEMED TO ME, AS WE SAT THAT NIGHT IN THE CRIMSON CABARET, THAT THIS "SIGNS AND ADVERTISEMENTS" MATERIAL WAS INTENDED TO LEND GREATER CREDENCE TO QUISSER'S STORY.
BUT WHEN I ASKED HIM IF HE RECALLED ANY PARTICULAR SIGNS AND ADVERTISEMENTS, HE BECAME SLIGHTLY DEFENSIVE–
–AS IF MY QUESTION WERE INTENDED TO CHALLENGE THE ACCURACY OF HIS CHILDHOOD RECOLLECTION.
HE THEN SHIFTED THE FOCUS OF THE ISSUE I HAD RAISED BY ASSERTING THAT THE CARNIVAL ASPECT OF THESE PLACES WAS NOT EXACTLY ATTACHED TO THE GAS STATION ASPECT–
–BUT THAT THEY WERE NEVER VERY FAR AWAY FROM EACH OTHER AND THERE WAS DEFINITELY A COMMERCIAL LIAISON BETWEEN THEM.
GREAT YEAR
THANK EVIL DEAD
UNCA STOOGE
LOLLIES

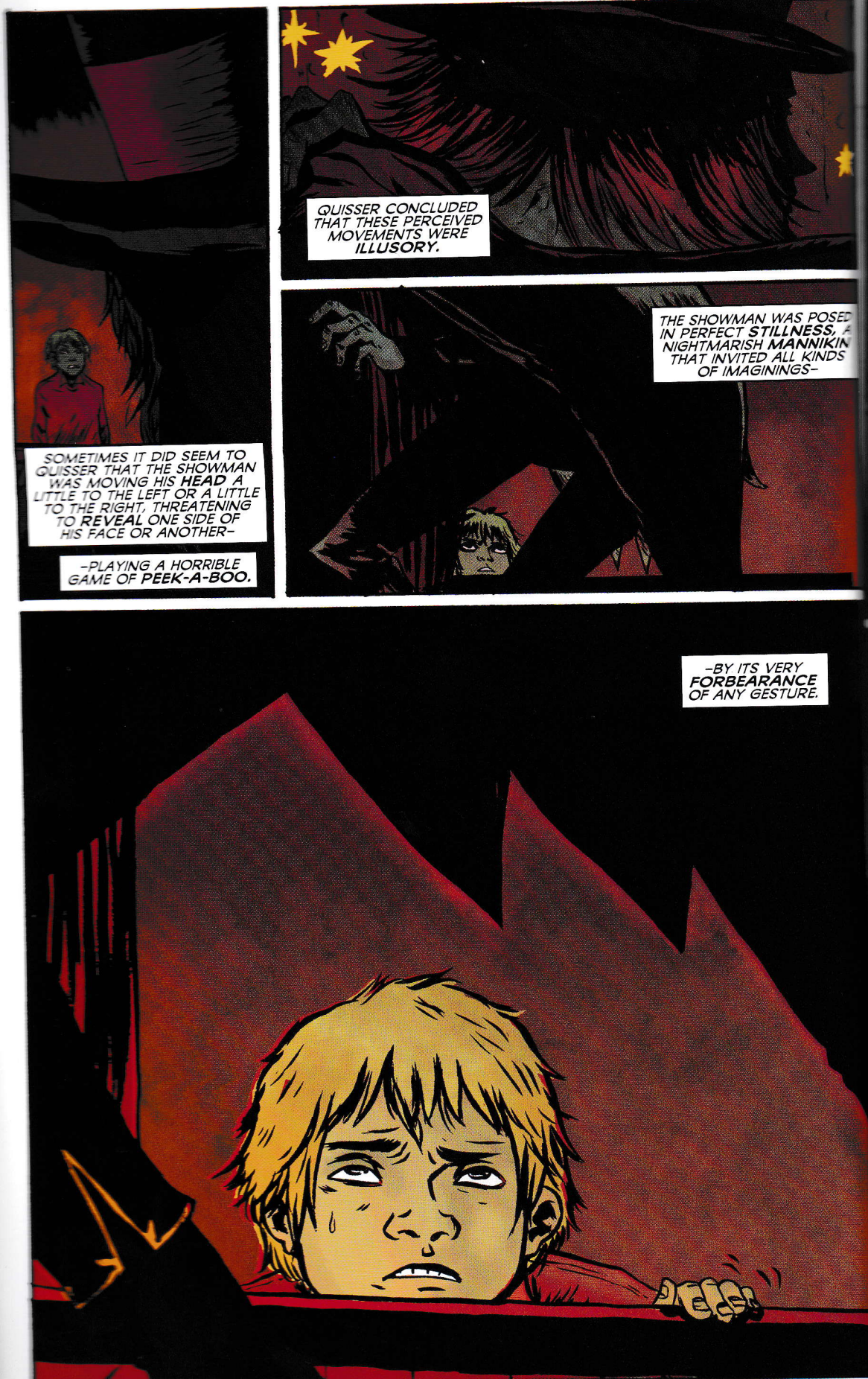
CARNIVAL
TODAY

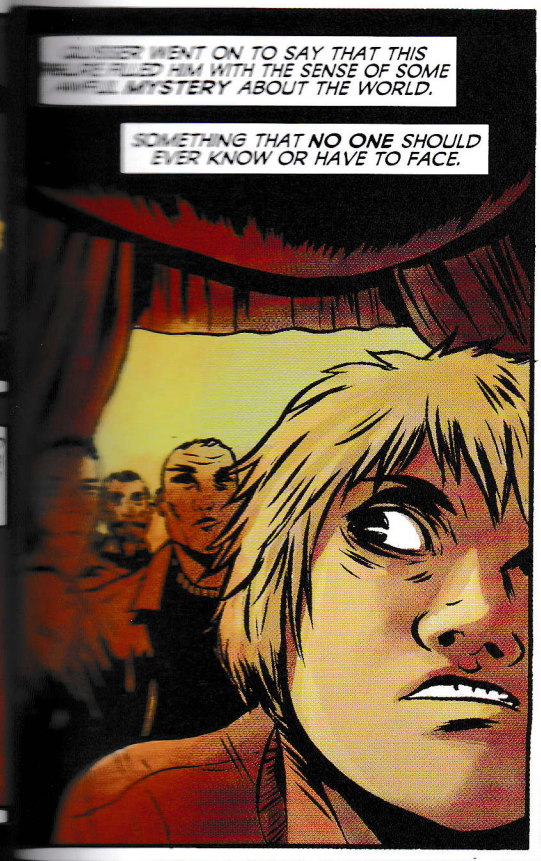
THERE WERE ONLY A FEW CARNIVAL RIDES, QUISSER NOTED. AND THESE WERE VERY SELDOM IN ACTUAL OPERATION.
ALL THE RIDES, IT SEEMED, WERE MINIATURE–
–SMALL-SCALE VERSIONS OF CARNIVAL RIDES HE HAD ELSEWHERE KNOWN AND HAD ACTUALLY RIDDEN UPON.
BESIDE THE MINIATURE MERRY-GO-ROUND THERE WOULD BE A MINIATURE FERRIS WHEEL–
–NO BIGGER THAN A BUNGALOW-STYLE HOUSE, QUISSER SAID–
–AND SOMETIMES A MINIATURE TILT-A-WHIRL OR A MINIATURE ROLLER COASTER.
AND THEY WERE ALWAYS CLOSED DOWN BECAUSE ONCE THEY HAD MALFUNCTIONED THEY WERE NEVER SUBSEQUENTLY REPAIRED.
YET THERE WAS A SINGLE, QUITE CRUCIAL AMUSEMENT THAT ONE COULD ALMOST ALWAYS EXPECT TO SEE OPEN TO THE PUBLIC...
SIDESHOW

THE ATTRACTIONS VARIED FROM WITNESS TO SIDESHOW, AND QUISSER SAID HE WAS UNABLE TO REMEMBER ALL OF THE ONES HE HAD SEEN.
HE DID RECALL WHAT HE DESCRIBED AS THE HUMAN SPIDER–
–A VERY BRIEF SPECTACLE DURING WHICH SOMEONE IN A CLUMSY COSTUME SCUTTLED FROM ONE SIDE OF THE STAGE TO THE OTHER AND BACK AGAIN BEFORE EXITING THROUGH A SLIT AT THE BACK OF THE TENT.
THERE WERE NUMEROUS OTHER SIDESHOW ACTS THAT QUISSER CLAIMED TO HAVE SEEN–
–INCLUDING THE DANCING PUPPET, THE WORM, THE HUNCHBACK AND DR. FINGERS.
THE HYPNOTIST WOULD GESTICULATE CHAOTICALLY IN FRONT OF THE AUDIENCE FOR SOME MOMENTS AND THEN STUMBLE OFF STAGE.
the HYPNOTIST
THE PERSON WEARING THE COSTUME WAS PRESUMABLY THE ATTENDANT WHO PUMPED GAS, WASHED WINDOWS, AND PERFORMED VARIOUS SERVICES AROUND THE FILLING STATION.

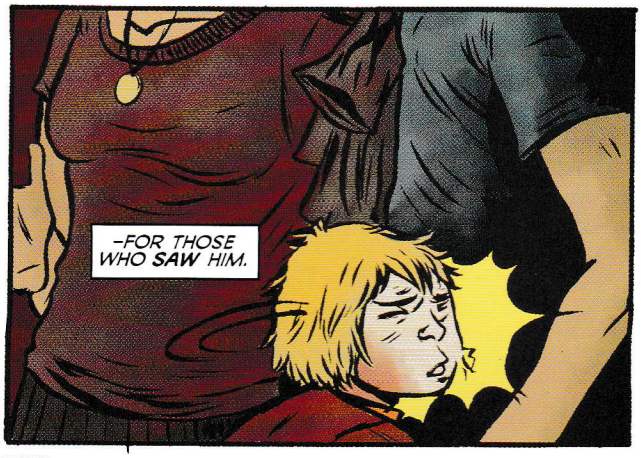

IN MANY OF THESE SIDESHOW PERFORMANCES, QUISSER REMEMBERED THAT A GAS STATION ATTENDANT'S UNIFORM WAS QUITE VISIBLE BENEATH THE PERFORMER'S STAGE CLOTHES.
WITH ONE IMPORTANT EXCEPTION, THE ROUTINE WAS ALWAYS THE SAME.
QUISSER WOULD ENTER THE SIDESHOW TENT AND SIT UPON ONE OF THE ROTTED BENCHES, SOON AFTER WHICH SOME PERFORMER WOULD APPEAR BRIEFLY ON THE SMALL STAGE THAT WAS LIT UP BY TWO ORDINARY FLOOR LAMPS.
THE SINGLE DEVIATION FROM THIS ROUTINE WAS A ATTRACTION THAT QUISSER CALLED THE SHOWMAN.

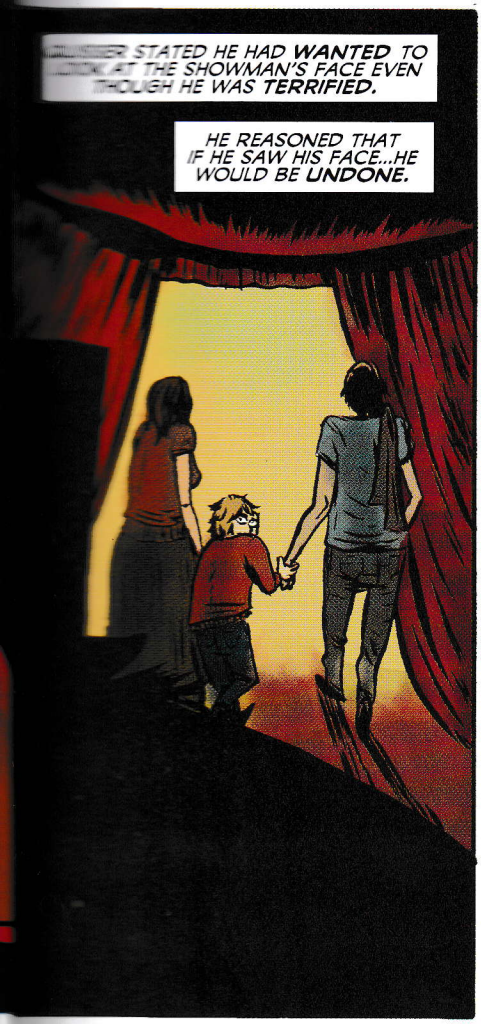
WHEREAS EVERY OTHER SIDESHOW
AND ENDED AFTER QUISSER
ENTERED THE SPECIAL TENT, THE ONE
CALLED THE SHOWMAN ALWAYS
SEEMED TO BE "IN PROGRESS."
AS SOON AS QUISSER STEPPED
INSIDE, HE SAW THE FIGURE STANDING
PERFECTLY STILL UPON THE SMALL
STAGE WITH HIS BACK TO THE AUDIENCE.
THE ENTIRE STANCE OF THE
FIGURE WAS CALCULATED
TO SUGGEST THAT AT ANY
MOMENT HE MIGHT TWIRL
ABOUT AND CONFRONT
THE AUDIENCE FULL-FACE.
YET THE FIGURE
NEVER BUDGED.

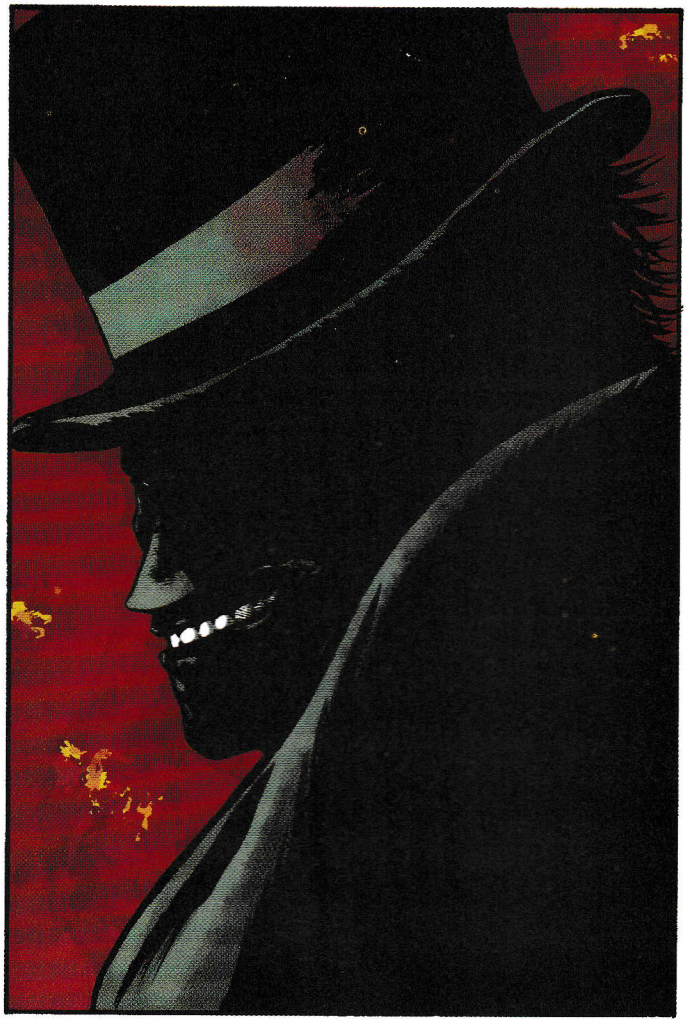

SOMETIMES IT DID SEEM TO QUISSER THAT THE SHOWMAN WAS MOVING HIS HEAD A LITTLE TO THE LEFT OR A LITTLE TO THE RIGHT, THREATENING TO REVEAL ONE SIDE OF HIS FACE OR ANOTHER–
–PLAYING A HORRIBLE GAME OF PEEK-A-BOO.
QUISSER CONCLUDED THAT THESE PERCEIVED MOVEMENTS WERE ILLUSORY.
THE SHOWMAN WAS POSED IN PERFECT STILLNESS, A NIGHTMARISH MANNIKIN THAT INVITED ALL KINDS OF IMAGININGS–
–BY ITS VERY FORBEARANCE OF ANY GESTURE.


...ER WENT ON TO SAY THAT THIS ...E FILLED HIM WITH THE SENSE OF SOME ...FUL MYSTERY ABOUT THE WORLD.
SOMETHING THAT NO ONE SHOULD EVER KNOW OR HAVE TO FACE.

AND THAT THERE WOULD BE TERRIBLE CONSEQUENCES-


-FOR THOSE WHO SAW HIM.


...ER STATED HE HAD WANTED TO ...K AT THE SHOWMAN'S FACE EVEN ...OUGH HE WAS TERRIFIED.
HE REASONED THAT IF HE SAW HIS FACE...HE WOULD BE UNDONE.



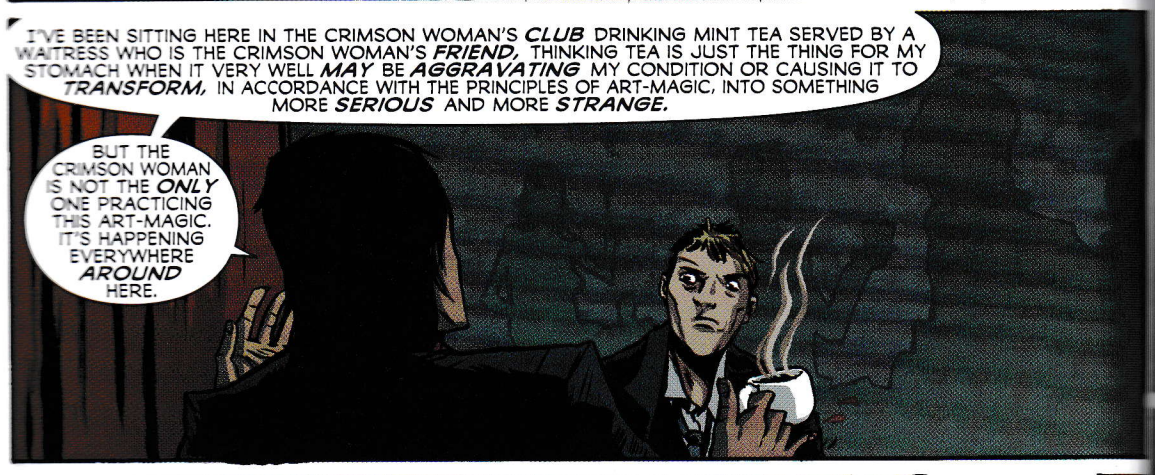
I THINK THAT WAS THE FIRST TIME THAT WORD OCCURRED TO ME.
UNDONE.
BUT WHAT IF HE HAD TURNED AROUND TO FACE THE AUDIENCE?
...
DID YOU HEAR WHAT I SAID?
WHEN I WAS VERY YOUNG THERE WERE... CERTAIN OCCASSIONS ON WHICH I WOULD SEE THE SHOWMAN–
–BUT HE WASN'T IN HIS NATURAL HABITAT, SO TO SPEAK, OF THE SIDESHOW TENT.
YOU REMEMBER THEM, DON'T YOU? THE GAS STATION CARNIVALS. MAYBE JUST A FAINT MEMORY.
I WAS SURE YOU WOULD BE THE ONE TO KNOW ABOUT THEM.
I THINK I CAN SAY I'VE HEARD ENOUGH OF YOUR GAS STATION CARNIVAL STORY TO KNOW WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT.

WHAT DO YOU MEAN–
WELL, FOR ONE THING...YOUR LATER MEMORIES, YOUR PURPORTED MEMORIES OF THAT SHOWMAN CHARACTER.
YOU WERE ABOUT TO TELL ME THAT THROUGHOUT YOUR CHILDHOOD YOU REPEATEDLY SAW THIS FIGURE AT VARIOUS TIMES AND IN VARIOUS PLACES.
PERHAPS YOU SAW HIM IN THE DISTANCE OF A SCHOOLYARD, STANDING WITH HIS BACK TO YOU.
AND YOU WERE GOING TO TELL ME THAT LATELY YOU'VE BEEN SEEING THIS FIGURE, OR FAINT SUGGESTIONS OF THIS FIGURE–
–SKETCHY REFLECTIONS IN STORE WINDOWS ALONG THE SIDEWALK, FLASHING GLIMPSES IN THE REARVIEW MIRROR OF YOUR CAR.
IT'S VERY MUCH LIKE ONE OF YOUR STORIES.
IN SOME WAYS IT IS AND IN SOME WAYS IT ISN'T.

YOU FEEL THAT IF YOU EVER SEE THE SHOWMAN FIGURE TURN HIS HEAD AROUND TO LOOK AT YOU...THAT SOMETHING TERRIBLE WILL HAPPEN, MOST LIKELY THAT YOU'LL PERISH ON THE SPOT FROM SOME KIND OF MONUMENTAL SHOCK.
YES...AN UNSUSTAINABLE HORROR. BUT I HAVEN'T TOLD YOU THE STRANGEST PART.
YOU'RE RIGHT. I HAVE HAD GLIMPSES OF...THAT FIGURE, AND I DID SEE HIM DURING MY CHILDHOOD, OUTSIDE OF THE SIDESHOW TENT, I MEAN.
BUT THE STRANGEST PART IS THAT I REMEMBER SEEING HIM IN OTHER PLACES EVEN BEFORE I FIRST SAW HIM AT THE GAS STATION CARNIVAL.
THIS IS JUST MY POINT.
WHAT IS?
THAT THERE ARE NO GAS STATION CARNIVALS. THERE NEVER WERE ANY. NOBODY REMEMBERS THEM BECAUSE THEY NEVER EXISTED.
THE WHOLE IDEA IS PREPOSTEROUS.
TAP!
BUT...MY PARENTS WERE THERE WITH ME.
EXACTLY! YOUR DEAD FATHER AND MENTALLY INCOMPETENT MOTHER.
DO YOU REMEMBER EVER DISCUSSING WITH THEM YOUR VACATION EXPERIENCES AT THESE SPECIAL GAS STATIONS WITH THE CARNIVALS SUPPOSEDLY ANNEXED TO THEM?
NO...I DON'T.
THAT'S BECAUSE YOU NEVER WENT TO ANY SUCH PLACES WITH THEM. THINK ABOUT HOW LUDICROUS IT ALL SOUNDS.
THAT THERE SHOULD BE FILLING STATIONS OUT IN THE STICKS THAT ENTICE CUSTOMERS WITH FREE ADMISSION TO BROKEN-DOWN CARNIVALS–
–IT'S ALL SO RIDICULOUS!
NO MORE RIDICULOUS THAN YOUR IDEAS ABOUT THE CRIMSON WOMAN!
MINIATURE CARNIVAL RIDES? GAS STATION ATTENDANTS DOUBLING AS SIDESHOW PERFORMERS?
NOT THE SHOWMAN!
HE WAS NEVER A GAS STATION ATTENDANT.
NO, OF COURSE HE WASN'T A GAS STATION ATTENDANT, BECAUSE HE WAS A DELUSION. THE WHOLE THING IS AN OUTRAGEOUS DELUSION.
BUT IT'S ALSO A PARTICULAR TYPE OF DELUSION.
AND WHAT TYPE WOULD THAT BE?

DO YOU KNOW HOW LONG YOU'VE BEEN UNDER THE SPELL OF THIS ART-MAGIC ILLUSION?
YOU'VE LOST ME.
FOR AS LONG AS YOU'VE BEEN A *VICTIM* OF THIS PARTICULAR ART-MAGIC, THIS IS HOW LONG YOU'VE BEEN *DELUSIONAL* ABOUT THE GAS STATION CARNIVALS AND ALL RELATED PHENOMENA.
AND HOW LONG IS *THAT?*
SINCE YOU HUMILIATED THE *CRIMSON WOMAN* BY CALLING HER A *DELUDED NO-TALENT.*
I TOLD YOU SHE HAD CONNECTIONS YOU KNOW ABSOLUTELY NOTHING ABOUT.

I'M TALKING ABOUT SOMETHING FROM MY CHILDHOOD, SOMETHING I'VE REMEMBERED MY ENTIRE LIFE.
YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT A MATTER OF DAYS.
THAT'S BECAUSE A MATTER OF DAYS IS EXACTLY THE TERM THAT YOU'VE BEEN DELUSIONAL. DON'T YOU SEE THAT THROUGH HER ART-MAGIC SHE HAS CAUSED YOU TO SUFFER FROM THE WORST KIND OF DELUSION, WHICH MIGHT BE CALLED A RETROACTIVE DELUSION.
AND IT'S NOT ONLY YOU WHO'VE BEEN AFFLICTED...


I'VE BEEN SITTING HERE IN THE CRIMSON WOMAN'S CLUB DRINKING MINT TEA SERVED BY A WAITRESS WHO IS THE CRIMSON WOMAN'S FRIEND, THINKING TEA IS JUST THE THING FOR MY STOMACH WHEN IT VERY WELL MAY BE AGGRAVATING MY CONDITION OR CAUSING IT TO TRANSFORM, IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE PRINCIPLES OF ART-MAGIC, INTO SOMETHING MORE SERIOUS AND MORE STRANGE.
BUT THE CRIMSON WOMAN IS NOT THE ONLY ONE PRACTICING THIS ART-MAGIC. IT'S HAPPENING EVERYWHERE AROUND HERE.

LOOK AT THE FACES IN THIS ROOM AND TELL ME THAT YOU ALONE ARE A VICTIM. THE CRIMSON WOMAN HAS QUITE A FEW ADVERSARIES, JUST AS SHE IS CONNECTED WITH POWERFUL ALLIES–
–SOME PARTICULAR GANG OF ILLUMINATI, OR ESOTERIC SCIENTISTS, AS SO MANY HAVE BEGUN STYLING THEMSELVES THESE DAYS.
BUT IT ALL SOUNDS LIKE ONE OF YOUR STORIES.

OF COURSE IT DOES. DON'T YOU THINK SHE KNOWS THAT?
BUT I'M NOT THE ONE WITH THAT GROTESQUE YARN ABOUT THE GAS STATION CARNIVALS AND THE SMALL STAGE NOT UNLIKE THE STAGE ON THE OPPOSITE SIDE OF THIS ROOM.
YOU CAN'T KEEP YOUR EYES OFF IT.

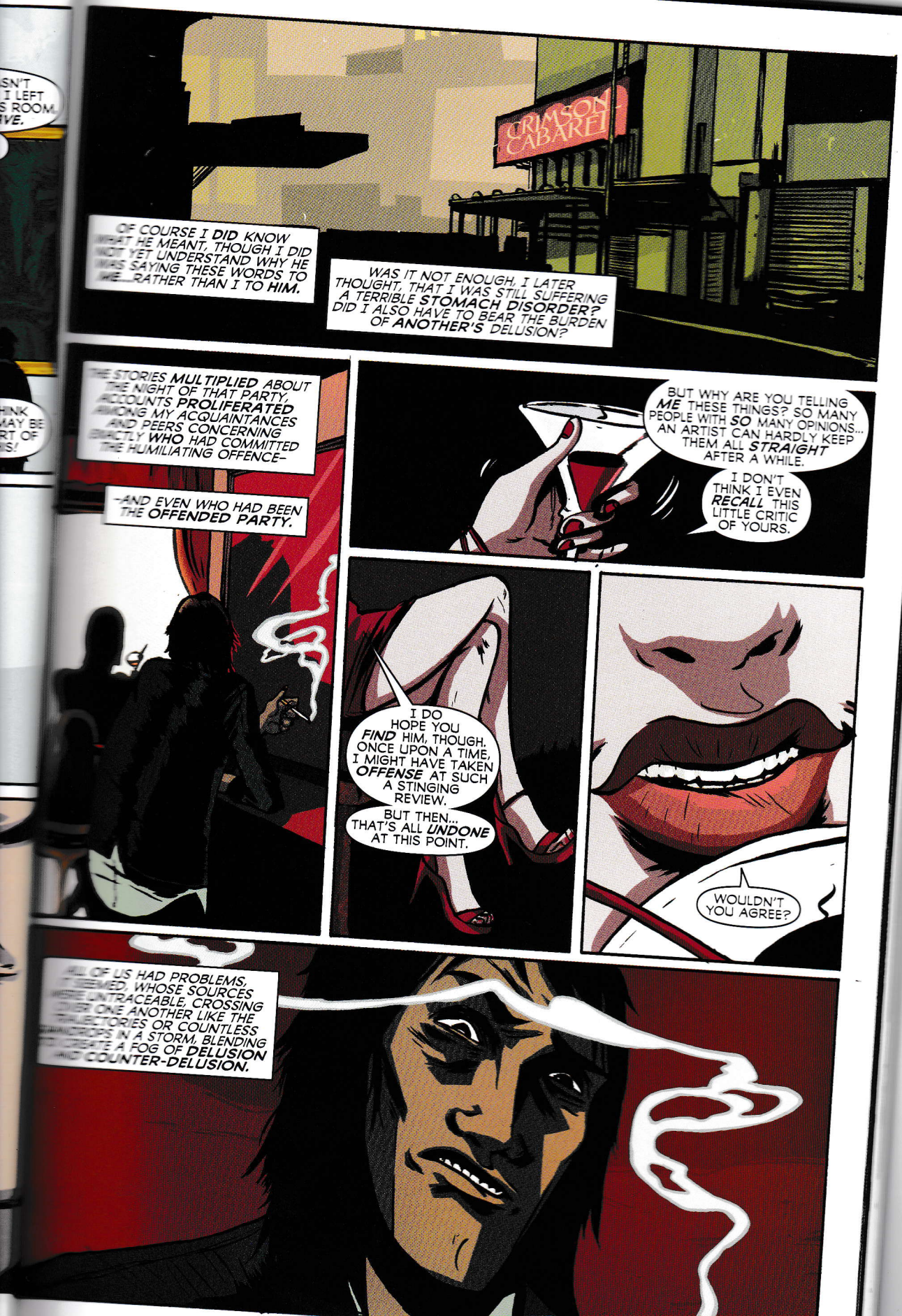
WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO DO ABOUT IT...?
YOU CAN START BY KEEPING YOUR EYES OFF THAT STAGE ACROSS THE ROOM.
THERE'S NOTHING YOU CAN SEE OVER THERE EXCEPT AN ART-MAGIC DELUSION.

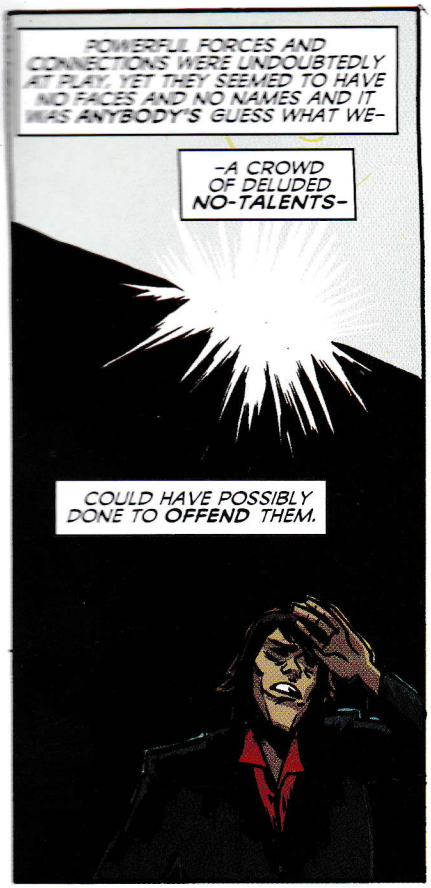
THERE IS NOTHING NECESSARILY FATAL OR PERMANENT ABOUT THE AFFLICTION. BUT YOU MUST BELIEVE THAT YOU WILL RECOVER.
OTHERWISE THESE DISEASES MAY TURN INTO SOMETHING FAR MORE DEADLY BECAUSE, ULTIMATELY, ALL DISEASES ARE MAGICAL DISEASES.
ESPECIALLY YOUR ART-MAGIC DELUSION.
I COULD NOW SEE THAT THE INTENSE CONVICTION CARRIED BY MY WORDS HAD FINALLY HAD ITS EFFECT ON QUISSER.
HE EXCUSED HIMSELF TO GO TO THE RESTROOM THEN. I HAVE NO IDEA HOW LONG HE WAS GONE FROM THE TABLE.
MY ATTENTION BECAME FULLY ABSORBED BY THE OTHER FACES IN THE CLUB AND THE DEEP ANXIETY THEY BETRAYED TO ME.
WHO WILL BE NEXT?" THESE FACES SEEMED TO ASK.
WHAT COULD A PERSON SAY THESE DAYS, OR EVEN THINK, WITHOUT FEELING THE DREAD REPERCUSSIONS FROM POWERFULLY CONNECTED GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS?
IT WOULD NOT OCCUR TO THEM, EVEN THOUGH THEY WERE A CROWD OF IMAGINATIVE ARTISTS, THAT THE WHOLE THING WAS SIMPLY A MATTER OF RANDOM, PURPOSELESS-
WOULD YOU LIKE YET ANOTHER CUP OF MINT TEA?
EH?

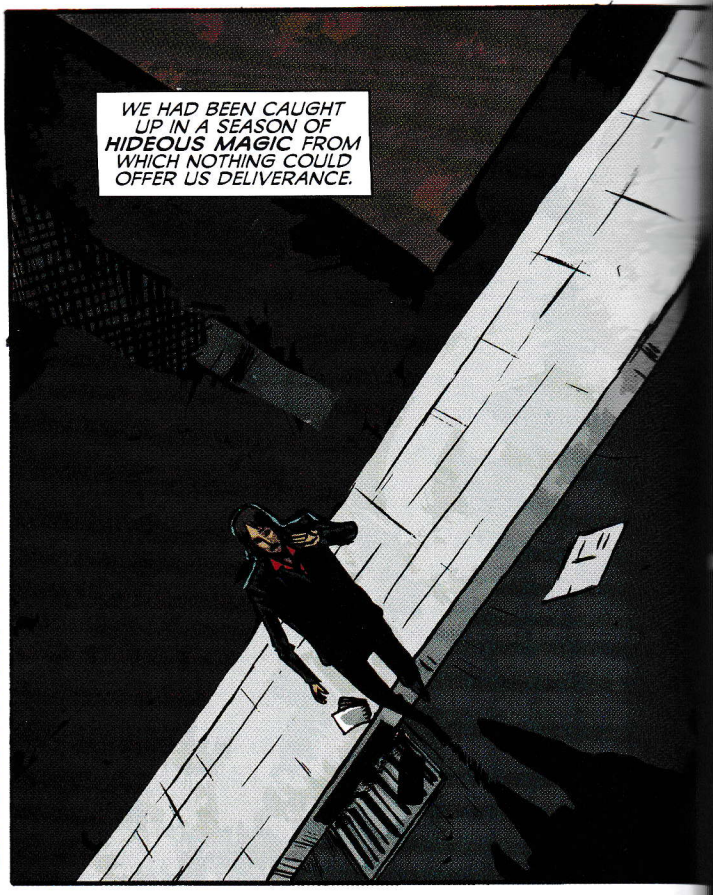
WELL, I WAS JUST ABOUT TO *LEAVE* FOR THE NIGHT.
PERHAPS MY *FRIEND* WOULD LIKE *YET ANOTHER* GLASS OF WINE, HM?
SIR?
YOU'VE BEEN SITTING HERE BY *YOURSELF* ALL NIGHT.
WOULD... *YOU* LIKE A GLASS OF WINE?
NO THANK YOU.
PARDON ME A MOMENT, WILL YOU?

MEN
"I THINK I NEED TO USE THE MEN'S ROOM."
OHHHH...
QUISSER?
I TRIED TO FIND SOMEONE IN THE CLUB WHO HAD SEEN ART CRITIC QUISSER TALKING TO ME AT GREAT LENGTH ABOUT GAS STATION CARNIVALS.
BUT ALL OF THEM SAID THEY HAD SEEN NO ONE OF THE KIND.

I FINALLY TRACKED HIM DOWN THE NEXT DAY AT A HOLE-IN-THE-WALL ART GALLERY.
HE MIGHT HAVE BEEN A SLIPPERY LITTLE MAN, BUT HE COULD HARDLY HIDE HIMSELF FROM ME FOREVER.
GALLERY 31
I TOLD YOU...I WASN'T FEELING WELL. AFTER I LEFT YOU TO USE THE MEN'S ROOM, I DECIDED TO LEAVE.
WHAT DOES IT MATTER?
IT MATTERS BECAUSE THE WAITRESS TOLD ME YOU WERE NEVER THERE IN THE FIRST PLACE.
I THINK SHE MAY BE A PART OF THIS!
QUISSER... DID YOU SEE ANYTHING IN THAT BATHROOM BY ANY CHANCE?
THEY'RE NOT ILLUSIONS... THOSE THINGS I TOLD YOU ABOUT.
PLEASE...I DON'T WANT ANY TROUBLE.

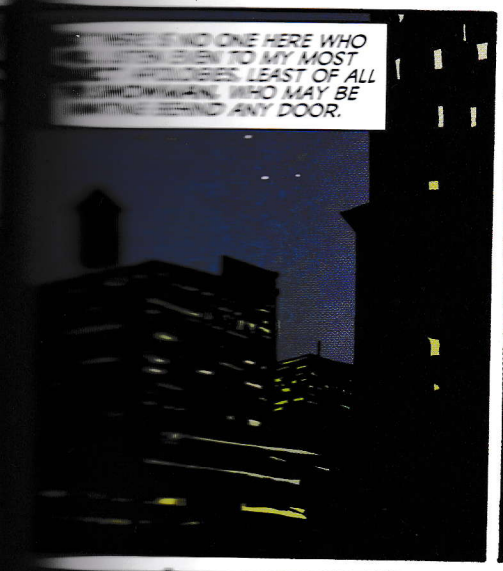

CRIMSON CABARET
OF COURSE I DID KNOW WHAT HE MEANT, THOUGH I DID NOT YET UNDERSTAND WHY HE WAS SAYING THESE WORDS TO ME...RATHER THAN I TO HIM.
WAS IT NOT ENOUGH, I LATER THOUGHT, THAT I WAS STILL SUFFERING A TERRIBLE STOMACH DISORDER? DID I ALSO HAVE TO BEAR THE BURDEN OF ANOTHER'S DELUSION?
THE STORIES MULTIPLIED ABOUT THE NIGHT OF THAT PARTY, ACCOUNTS PROLIFERATED AMONG MY ACQUAINTANCES AND PEERS CONCERNING EXACTLY WHO HAD COMMITTED THE HUMILIATING OFFENCE–
–AND EVEN WHO HAD BEEN THE OFFENDED PARTY.
BUT WHY ARE YOU TELLING ME THESE THINGS? SO MANY PEOPLE WITH SO MANY OPINIONS... AN ARTIST CAN HARDLY KEEP THEM ALL STRAIGHT AFTER A WHILE.
I DON'T THINK I EVEN RECALL THIS LITTLE CRITIC OF YOURS.
I DO HOPE YOU FIND HIM, THOUGH. ONCE UPON A TIME, I MIGHT HAVE TAKEN OFFENSE AT SUCH A STINGING REVIEW.
BUT THEN... THAT'S ALL UNDONE AT THIS POINT.
WOULDN'T YOU AGREE?
ALL OF US HAD PROBLEMS, IT SEEMED, WHOSE SOURCES WERE UNTRACEABLE, CROSSING OVER ONE ANOTHER LIKE THE TRAJECTORIES OR COUNTLESS RAINDROPS IN A STORM, BLENDING TO CREATE A FOG OF DELUSION AND COUNTER-DELUSION.

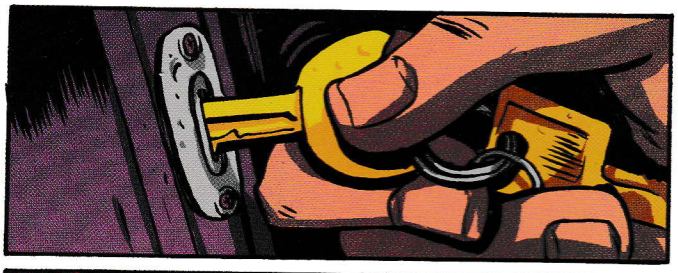

POWERFUL FORCES AND CONNECTIONS WERE UNDOUBTEDLY AT PLAY. YET THEY SEEMED TO HAVE NO FACES AND NO NAMES AND IT WAS ANYBODY'S GUESS WHAT WE–
–A CROWD OF DELUDED NO-TALENTS–
COULD HAVE POSSIBLY DONE TO OFFEND THEM.

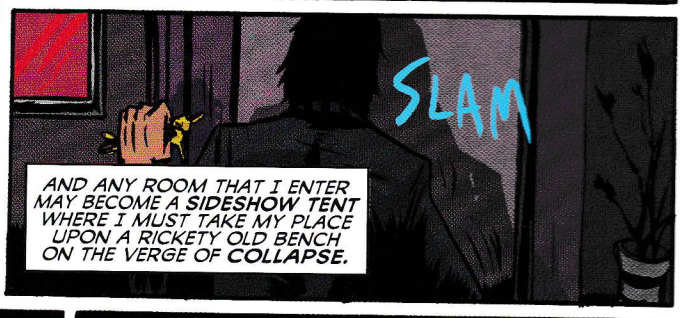

WE HAD BEEN CAUGHT UP IN A SEASON OF HIDEOUS MAGIC FROM WHICH NOTHING COULD OFFER US DELIVERANCE.

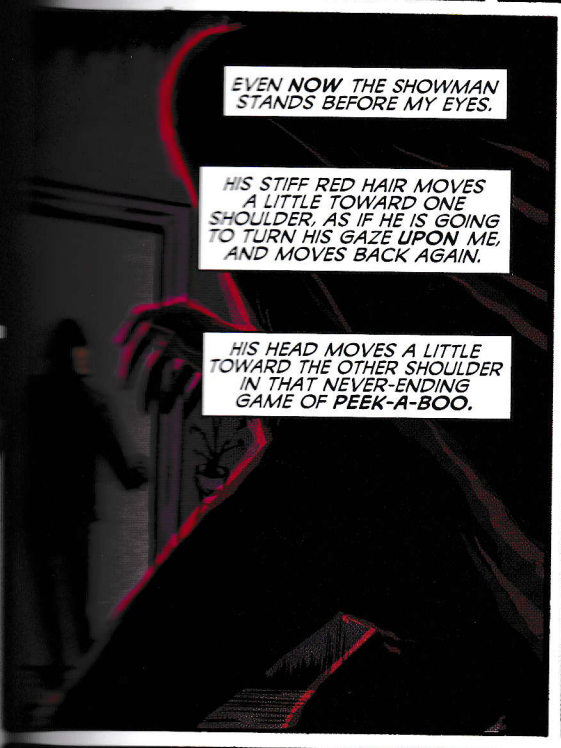
MORE AND MORE, I FOUND MYSELF RETURNING TO THOSE MEMORIES OF GAS STATION CARNIVALS–
PAF!

–SEEKING AN ANSWER IN THE TWILIGHT OF REMOTE RURAL AREAS WHERE MINIATURE MERRY-GO-ROUNDS AND FERRIS WHEELS LAY BROKEN IN A DESOLATE LANDSCAPE.

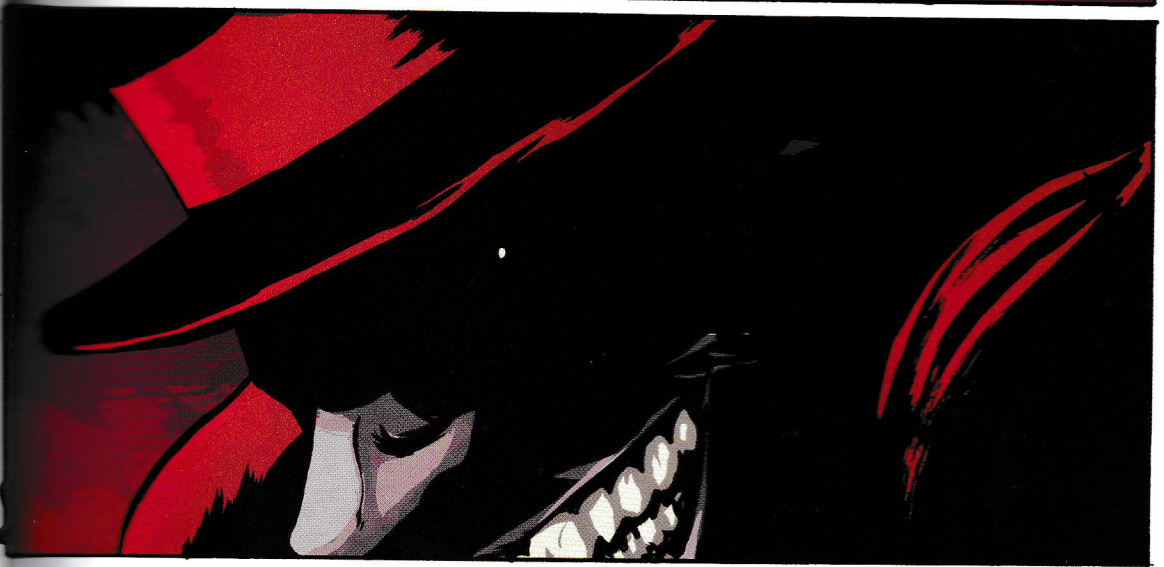

IS NO ONE HERE WHO
EN TO MY MOST
LEAST OF ALL
WHO MAY BE
ANY DOOR.




SLAM
AND ANY ROOM THAT I ENTER MAY BECOME A **SIDESHOW TENT** WHERE I MUST TAKE MY PLACE UPON A RICKETY OLD BENCH ON THE VERGE OF **COLLAPSE.**


EVEN **NOW** THE SHOWMAN STANDS BEFORE MY EYES.
HIS STIFF RED HAIR MOVES A LITTLE TOWARD ONE SHOULDER, AS IF HE IS GOING TO TURN HIS GAZE **UPON** ME, AND MOVES BACK AGAIN.
HIS HEAD MOVES A LITTLE TOWARD THE OTHER SHOULDER IN THAT NEVER-ENDING GAME OF **PEEK-A-BOO.**

I CAN ONLY SIT AND WAIT, KNOWING THAT **ONE DAY** HE WILL TURN FULL AROUND, STEP DOWN FROM THAT STAGE, AND CLAIM ME FOR THE **ABYSS** I HAVE ALWAYS FEARED.



PERHAPS THEN I WILL DISCOVER WHAT IT WAS I DI
-WHAT ANY OF US DID-
-TO DESERV THIS FATE.
THE EN

THE CLOWN PUPPET

Introduction

Whatever else we may be as creatures that go to and fro on the earth, we are also just meat. A cannibalistic tribe that once flourished had a word to describe what they ate. That word translates as "the food that talks."

Most of the food that humans have eaten over the course of our history has not talked. But it does make other noises, terrible sounds as it transitions from living prey to dead carcass on the slaughterhouse floor. If we could hear these sounds every time we ate a meal, would we still be the proficient gobblers of flesh that most of us are now? It's hard to say. But as Farmer Vincent (Rory Calhoun) proclaims in the movie *Motel Hell*, "Meat's meat and a man's gotta eat."

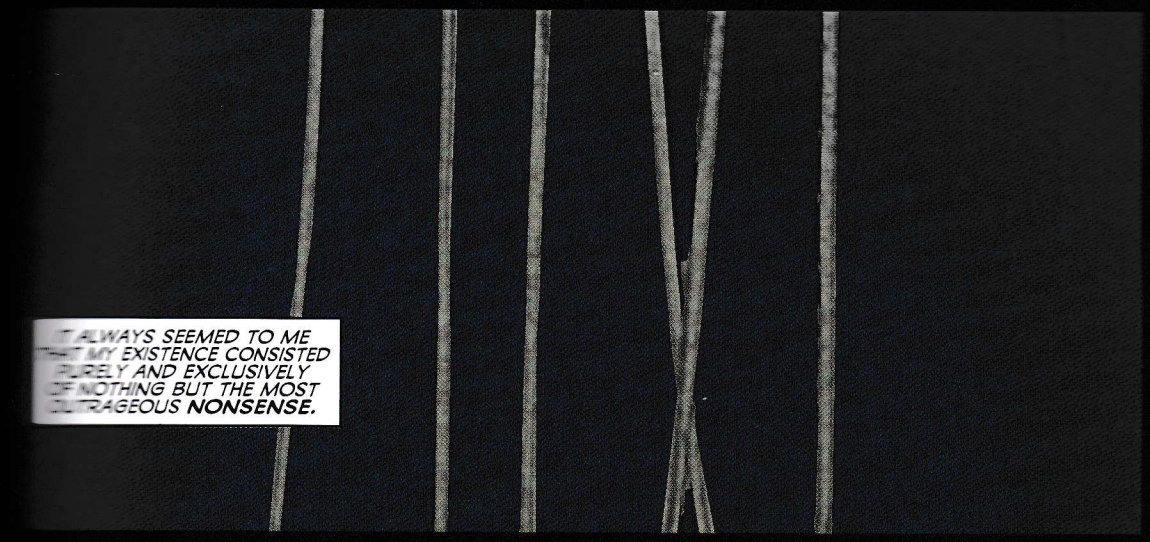
And, "it takes all kinds of critters to make Farmer Vincent's fritters."

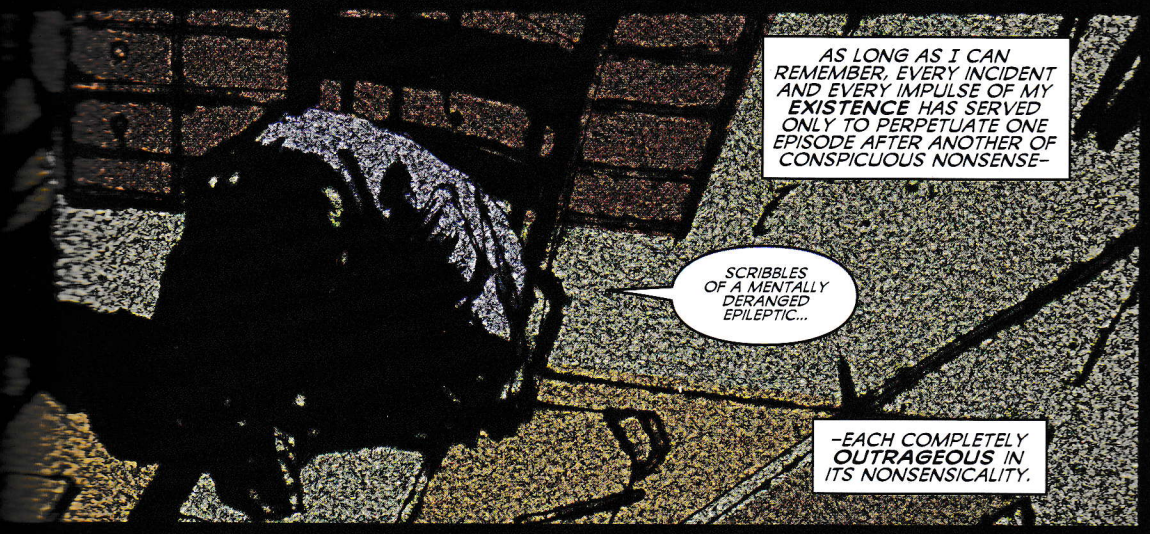
Beef, pork, sometimes even goat is ingested and expelled from us, all as part of the radical nonsense that nature has forced upon man. But it is not the only nonsense we endure from going to and fro on the earth, to borrow the phrase Satan uses in the Book of Job to explain to God from whence he has come.

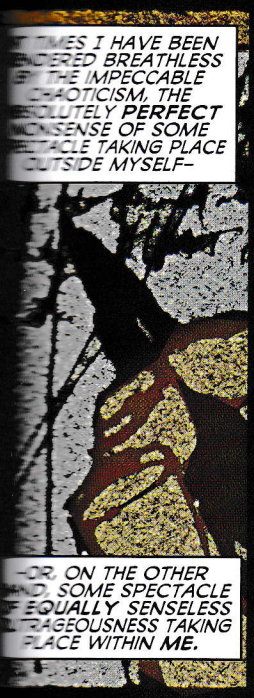
The nature nonsense; the God nonsense. How much nonsense can we stand in our lives? And is there any way to escape it? No, there is not. We are doomed to bear all kinds of nonsense including the pain nonsense and the nightmare nonsense, among many others. This nonsense is brought to us on a plate and we must consume it or face the death nonsense too.

The narrator of "The Clown Puppet" knows quite a bit about the nonsense of this world. He even knows about a special variety of nonsense, though he knows not from where it comes. All he can do is try to keep one step ahead of this nonsense as it doggedly pursues him wherever he goes. It is a particularly menacing type of nonsense one cannot readily identify until it is right upon him. And then it is too late to escape it.

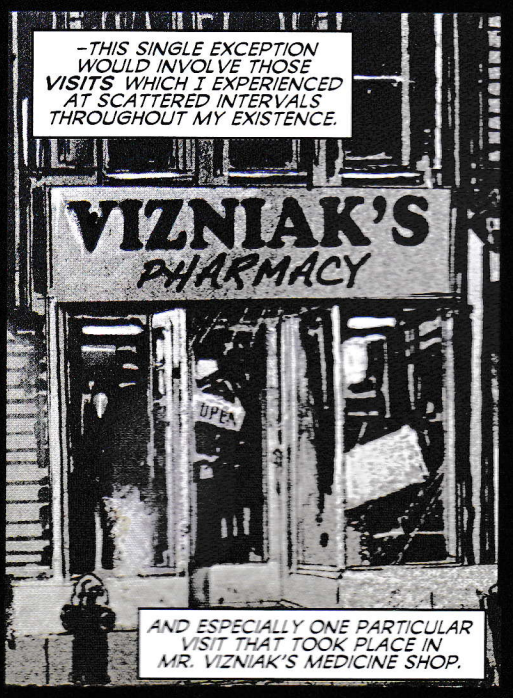
—J.L.


IT ALWAYS SEEMED TO ME THAT MY EXISTENCE CONSISTED PURELY AND EXCLUSIVELY OF NOTHING BUT THE MOST OUTRAGEOUS **NONSENSE.**


AS LONG AS I CAN REMEMBER, EVERY INCIDENT AND EVERY IMPULSE OF MY **EXISTENCE** HAS SERVED ONLY TO PERPETUATE ONE EPISODE AFTER ANOTHER OF CONSPICUOUS NONSENSE–
SCRIBBLES OF A MENTALLY DERANGED EPILEPTIC...
–EACH COMPLETELY **OUTRAGEOUS** IN ITS NONSENSICALITY.


T TIMES I HAVE BEEN NDERED BREATHLESS BY THE IMPECCABLE CHAOTICISM, THE BSOLUTELY **PERFECT** NONSENSE OF SOME TACLE TAKING PLACE OUTSIDE MYSELF–
–OR, ON THE OTHER ND, SOME SPECTACLE F **EQUALLY** SENSELESS TRAGEOUSNESS TAKING PLACE WITHIN **ME.**

IF I MAY **ALLOW** ANY EXCEPTION TO THE OUTRAGEOUSLY NONSENSICAL CONDITION I HAVE DESCRIBED–
–AND I WILL ALLOW **NONE**–


–THIS SINGLE EXCEPTION WOULD INVOLVE THOSE **VISITS** WHICH I EXPERIENCED AT SCATTERED INTERVALS THROUGHOUT MY EXISTENCE.
VIZNIAK'S
PHARMACY
OPEN
AND ESPECIALLY ONE PARTICULAR VISIT THAT TOOK PLACE IN MR. VIZNIAK'S MEDICINE SHOP.

MR. WOJNIAK LIVED IN THE SMALL APARTMENT ABOVE THE SHOP, AND HE GAVE ME PERMISSION TO KEEP THE PLACE OPEN OR CLOSE IT UP AS I LIKED AFTER A CERTAIN HOUR.
BUTCHER SHO
QUALITY MEATS
BEEF
PORK
GOAT
THE SHOP WAS LOCATED ON AN OBSCURE BACKSTREET, THE NEIGHBORHOOD OUTSIDE WAS PROFOUNDLY INACTIVE DURING THE LATER HOURS OF THE NIGHT.
AND SINCE MOST OF THE STREETLAMPS WERE EITHER BROKEN OR DEFECTIVE IN SOME WAY, THE ONLY THING I COULD SEE WAS THE NEON LETTERING IN THE WINDOW OF THE MEAT STORE DIRECTLY ACROSS THE STREET.

SOMETIMES I WOULD STARE AT THESE WORDS...

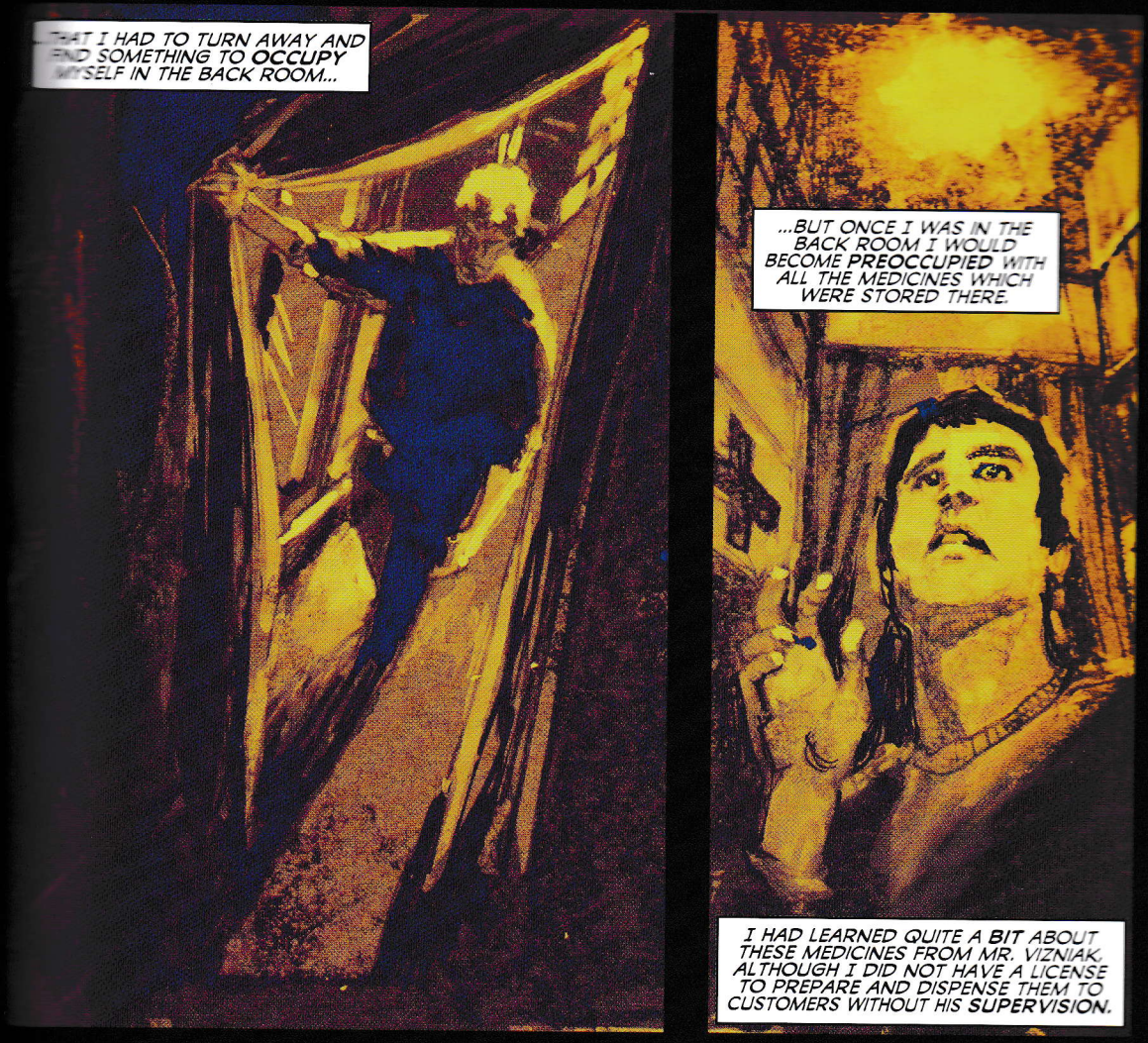
BEEF
PORK
GOAT

...AND CONTEMPLATE THEM...

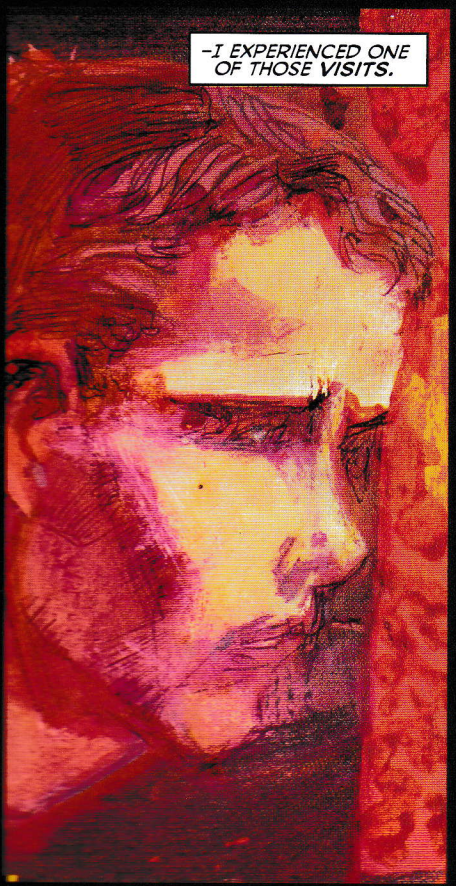
BEEF
PORK
GOAT
BZZT

...UNTIL MY HEAD BECAME SO FULL OF MEAT NONSENSE...
...OF BEEF AND PORK AND GOAT NONSENSE...

BEEF
PORK
GOAT


...THAT I HAD TO TURN AWAY AND FIND SOMETHING TO OCCUPY MYSELF IN THE BACK ROOM...
...BUT ONCE I WAS IN THE BACK ROOM I WOULD BECOME PREOCCUPIED WITH ALL THE MEDICINES WHICH WERE STORED THERE.
I HAD LEARNED QUITE A BIT ABOUT THESE MEDICINES FROM MR. VIZNIAK. ALTHOUGH I DID NOT HAVE A LICENSE TO PREPARE AND DISPENSE THEM TO CUSTOMERS WITHOUT HIS SUPERVISION.

I KNEW WHICH MEDICINES COULD BE USED TO MOST EASILY CAUSE DEATH IN SOMEONE WHO HAD INGESTED THEM.
THUS, WHENEVER I WENT INTO THE BACK ROOM TO RELIEVE MY MIND FROM ALL THE MEAT NONSENSE, I ALMOST IMMEDIATELY BECAME PREOCCUPIED WITH FATAL MEDICINES.
IN OTHER WORDS, I WOULD THEN BECOME OBSESSED WITH DEATH NONSENSE–
–WHICH IS ONE OF THE WORST AND MOST OUTRAGEOUS FORMS OF ALL NONSENSE.

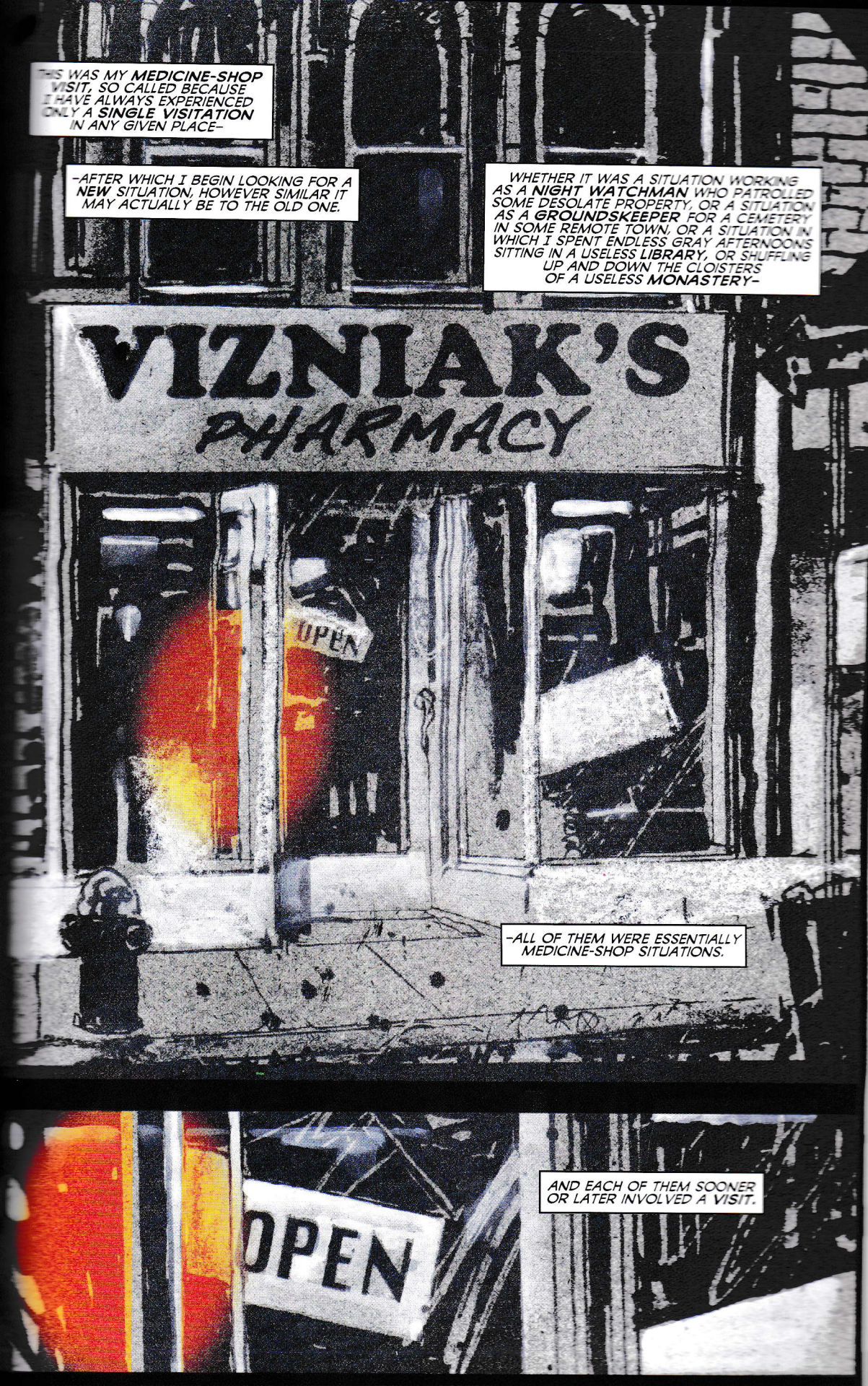


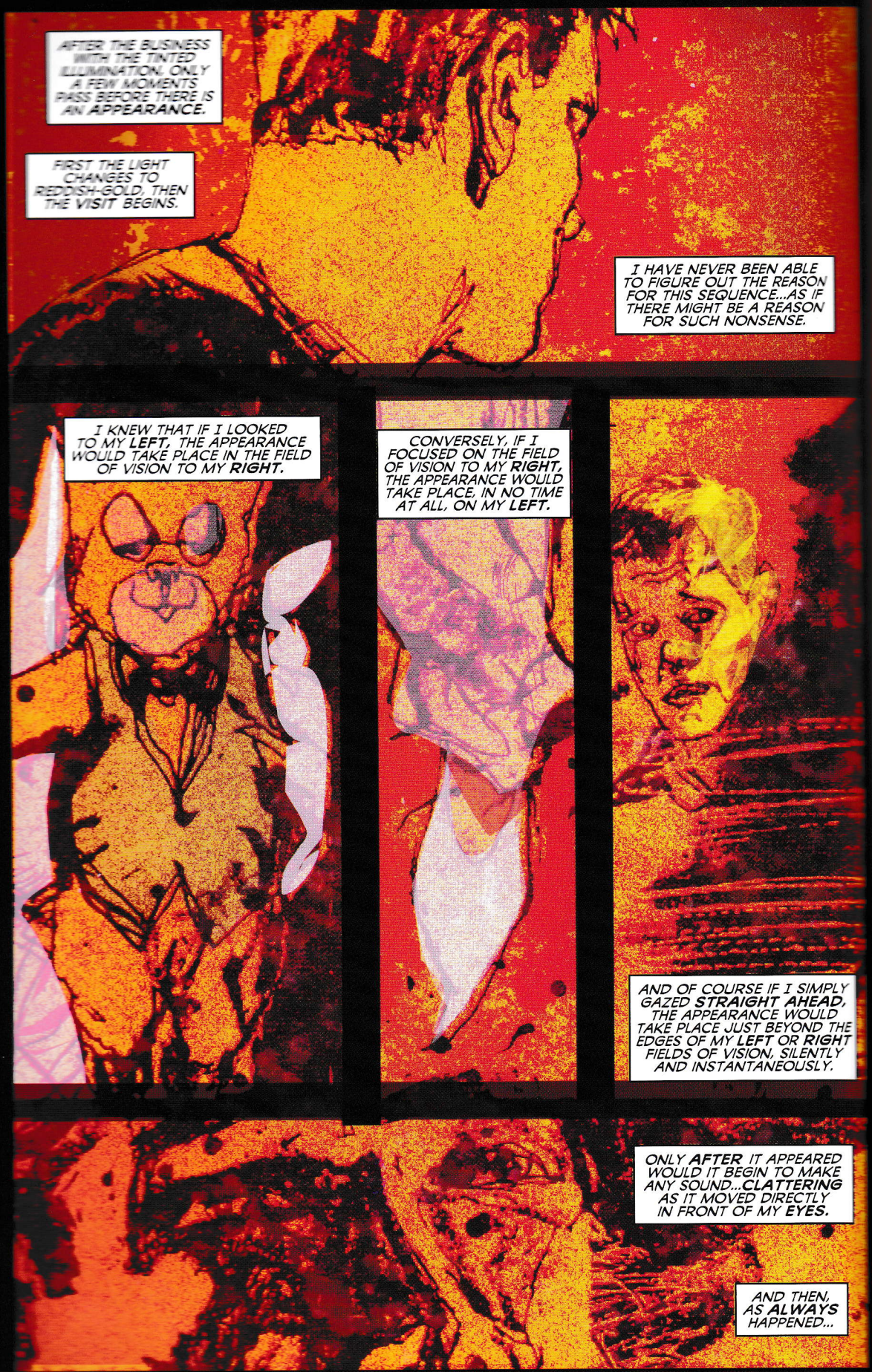
IT BEGAN WITH AN ALREADY FAMILIAR ROUTINE OF **NONSENSE.**

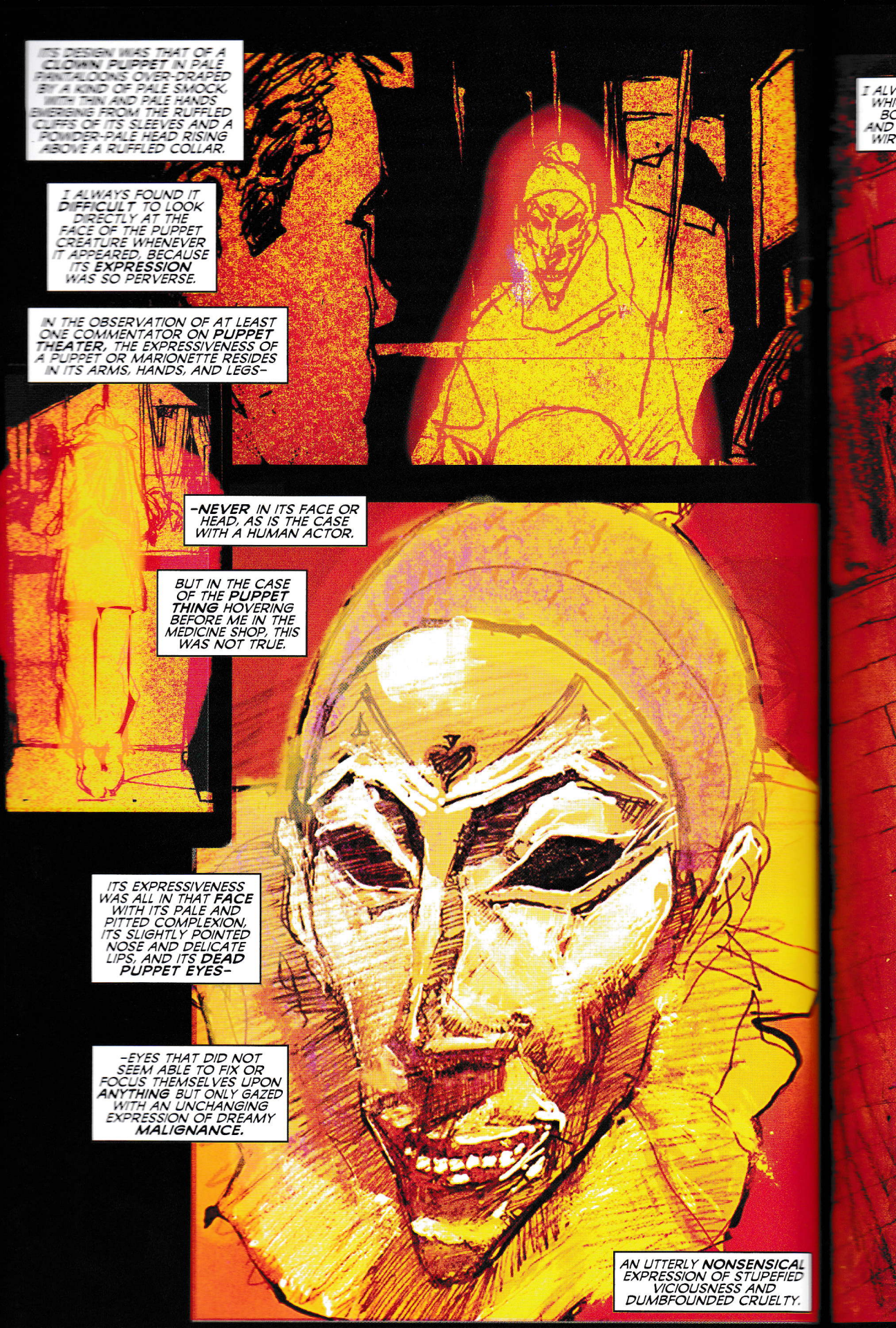
GRADUALLY, THE **LIGHT** RADIATED BY THE FIXTURES ALONG THE WALLS CHANGED FROM A DIM YELLOW TO A **RICH YELLOW-GOLD.**

IN THE NEW LIGHT, THE SHOP TOOK ON THE STRANGE **OPULENCE** OF AN OLD OIL PAINTING; EVERYTHING BECAME **TRANSFORMED** BENEATH A THICK VENEER OF GLEAMING OBSCURITY.

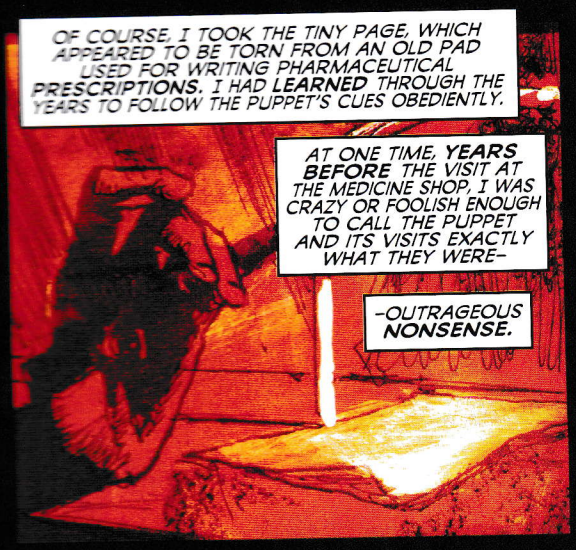
AND I HAVE ALWAYS WONDERED HOW MY OWN **FACE** APPEARS IN THIS NEW LIGHT, BUT AT THE TIME I CAN NEVER **THINK** ABOUT SUCH THINGS BECAUSE I **KNOW** WHAT IS ABOUT TO HAPPEN–
–AND ALL I CAN DO IS **HOPE** THAT IT WILL SOON BE OVER.

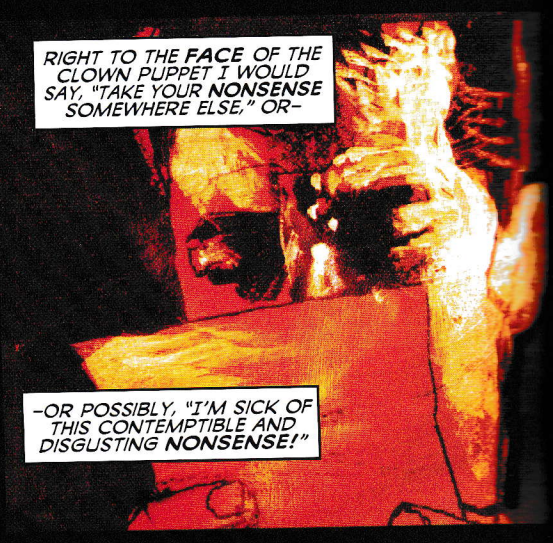

THIS WAS MY MEDICINE-SHOP VISIT, SO CALLED BECAUSE I HAVE ALWAYS EXPERIENCED ONLY A SINGLE VISITATION IN ANY GIVEN PLACE–
–AFTER WHICH I BEGIN LOOKING FOR A NEW SITUATION, HOWEVER SIMILAR IT MAY ACTUALLY BE TO THE OLD ONE.
WHETHER IT WAS A SITUATION WORKING AS A NIGHT WATCHMAN WHO PATROLLED SOME DESOLATE PROPERTY, OR A SITUATION AS A GROUNDSKEEPER FOR A CEMETERY IN SOME REMOTE TOWN, OR A SITUATION IN WHICH I SPENT ENDLESS GRAY AFTERNOONS SITTING IN A USELESS LIBRARY, OR SHUFFLING UP AND DOWN THE CLOISTERS OF A USELESS MONASTERY–
VIZNIAK'S
PHARMACY
OPEN
–ALL OF THEM WERE ESSENTIALLY MEDICINE-SHOP SITUATIONS.
OPEN
AND EACH OF THEM SOONER OR LATER INVOLVED A VISIT.


AFTER THE BUSINESS WITH THE TINTED ILLUMINATION, ONLY A FEW MOMENTS PASS BEFORE THERE IS AN APPEARANCE.
FIRST THE LIGHT CHANGES TO REDDISH-GOLD, THEN THE VISIT BEGINS.
I HAVE NEVER BEEN ABLE TO FIGURE OUT THE REASON FOR THIS SEQUENCE...AS IF THERE MIGHT BE A REASON FOR SUCH NONSENSE.
I KNEW THAT IF I LOOKED TO MY LEFT, THE APPEARANCE WOULD TAKE PLACE IN THE FIELD OF VISION TO MY RIGHT.
CONVERSELY, IF I FOCUSED ON THE FIELD OF VISION TO MY RIGHT, THE APPEARANCE WOULD TAKE PLACE, IN NO TIME AT ALL, ON MY LEFT.
AND OF COURSE IF I SIMPLY GAZED STRAIGHT AHEAD, THE APPEARANCE WOULD TAKE PLACE JUST BEYOND THE EDGES OF MY LEFT OR RIGHT FIELDS OF VISION, SILENTLY AND INSTANTANEOUSLY.
ONLY AFTER IT APPEARED WOULD IT BEGIN TO MAKE ANY SOUND...CLATTERING AS IT MOVED DIRECTLY IN FRONT OF MY EYES.
AND THEN, AS ALWAYS HAPPENED...

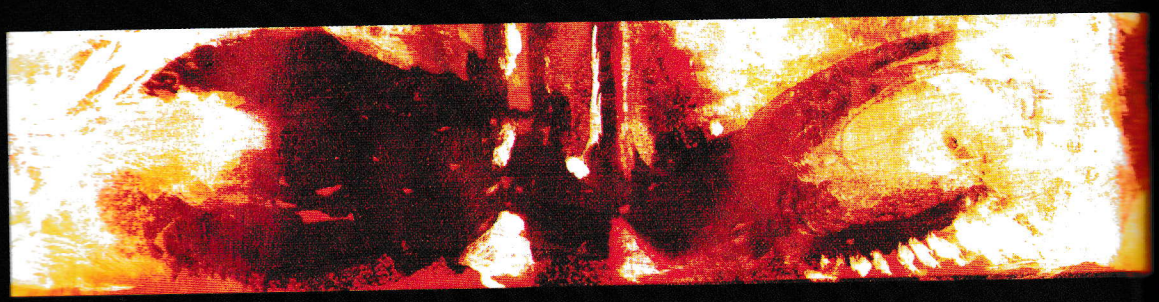

ITS DESIGN WAS THAT OF A CLOWN PUPPET IN PALE PANTALOONS OVER-DRAPED BY A KIND OF PALE SMOCK, WITH THIN AND PALE HANDS EMERGING FROM THE RUFFLED CUFFS OF ITS SLEEVES AND A POWDER-PALE HEAD RISING ABOVE A RUFFLED COLLAR.
I ALWAYS FOUND IT DIFFICULT TO LOOK DIRECTLY AT THE FACE OF THE PUPPET CREATURE WHENEVER IT APPEARED, BECAUSE ITS EXPRESSION WAS SO PERVERSE.
IN THE OBSERVATION OF AT LEAST ONE COMMENTATOR ON PUPPET THEATER, THE EXPRESSIVENESS OF A PUPPET OR MARIONETTE RESIDES IN ITS ARMS, HANDS, AND LEGS–
–NEVER IN ITS FACE OR HEAD, AS IS THE CASE WITH A HUMAN ACTOR.
BUT IN THE CASE OF THE PUPPET THING HOVERING BEFORE ME IN THE MEDICINE SHOP, THIS WAS NOT TRUE.
ITS EXPRESSIVENESS WAS ALL IN THAT FACE WITH ITS PALE AND PITTED COMPLEXION, ITS SLIGHTLY POINTED NOSE AND DELICATE LIPS, AND ITS DEAD PUPPET EYES–
–EYES THAT DID NOT SEEM ABLE TO FIX OR FOCUS THEMSELVES UPON ANYTHING BUT ONLY GAZED WITH AN UNCHANGING EXPRESSION OF DREAMY MALIGNANCE.
AN UTTERLY NONSENSICAL EXPRESSION OF STUPEFIED VICIOUSNESS AND DUMBFOUNDED CRUELTY.

I ALWAYS LOOKED AT THE WIRES WHICH WERE ATTACHED TO THE BODY OF THE PUPPET THING, AND I TRIED TO FOLLOW THOSE WIRES TO SEE WHERE THEY LED.
BUT AT SOME POINT MY VISION FAILED ME. THEY BECAME LOST IN A THICK BLUR, A CEILING OF DISTORTED LIGHT AND SHADOW.
THIS PHENOMENON SUPPORTED MY OBSERVATION OVER THE YEARS THAT THE PUPPET THING DID NOT HAVE A LIFE OF ITS OWN. IT WAS SOLELY BY MEANS OF THESE WIRES, IN MY VIEW, THAT THE CREATURE WAS ABLE TO PROCEED THROUGH ITS FAMILIAR MOTIONS.
THE TERM "MOTIONS," AS I BOTHERED TO DISCOVER IN THE COURSE OF MY USELESS RESEARCH INTO THE SUBJECT, WAS COMMONLY EMPLOYED AT ONE TIME, LONG AGO, TO REFER TO VARIOUS TYPES OF PUPPETS, AS IN THE STATEMENT:
"THE MOTIONS RECENTLY VIEWED AT ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S FAIR WERE ENGAGED IN A QUESTIONABLE PROBITY BEFORE AN AUDIENCE WHICH MIGHT HAVE BETTER PROFITED BY CONTEMPLATION OF THE DESTINY OF THEIR IMMORTAL SOULS..."
ITS BODY PARTS RATTLED LOOSELY IN THE LATE NIGHT QUIET BEFORE COMING TO REST.


OF COURSE, I TOOK THE TINY PAGE, WHICH APPEARED TO BE TORN FROM AN OLD PAD USED FOR WRITING PHARMACEUTICAL **PRESCRIPTIONS**. I HAD **LEARNED** THROUGH THE YEARS TO FOLLOW THE PUPPET'S CUES OBEDIENTLY.
AT ONE TIME, **YEARS BEFORE** THE VISIT AT THE MEDICINE SHOP, I WAS CRAZY OR FOOLISH ENOUGH TO CALL THE PUPPET AND ITS VISITS EXACTLY WHAT THEY WERE–
–OUTRAGEOUS **NONSENSE.**


RIGHT TO THE **FACE** OF THE CLOWN PUPPET I WOULD SAY, "TAKE YOUR **NONSENSE** SOMEWHERE ELSE," OR–
–OR POSSIBLY, "I'M SICK OF THIS CONTEMPTIBLE AND DISGUSTING **NONSENSE!**"

BUT NONE OF THESE OUTBURSTS COUNTED FOR ANYTHING.

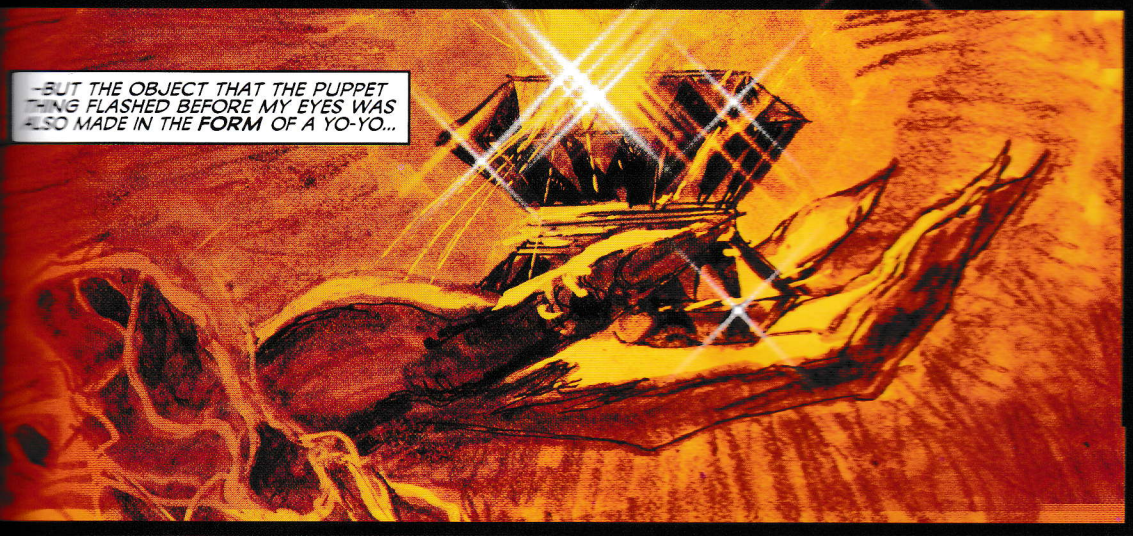


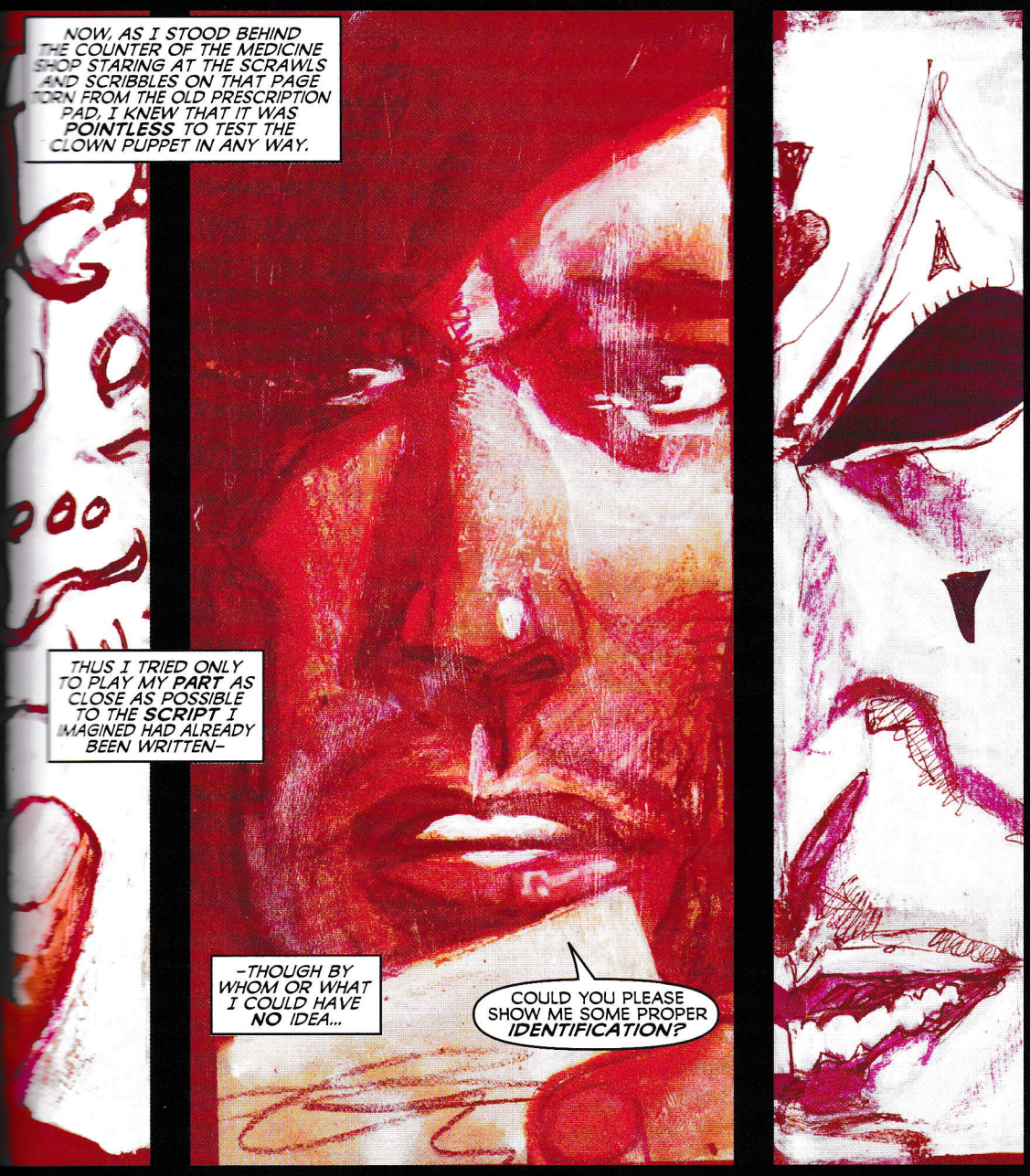
I KNEW THAT IT WAS **MY PART** TO PLAY ALONG WITH THE CLOWN PUPPET, ALTHOUGH I WAS NEVER PRECISELY **CERTAIN** WHAT WAS EXPECTED OF ME...

FROM PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE I HAD LEARNED THAT IT WAS FUTILE TO DETERMINE WHAT WOULD EVENTUALLY TRANSPIRE DURING A PARTICULAR VISIT–
PAWN SHOP
–BECAUSE THE PUPPET CREATURE WAS CAPABLE OF ALMOST ANYTHING.
FOR EXAMPLE, ONCE IT VISITED ME WHEN I WAS WORKING THROUGH THE NIGHT AT A SKID-ROW PAWN SHOP.
I TOLD THE THING THAT IT WAS WASTING MY TIME UNLESS IT COULD PRODUCE AN EXQUISITELY CUT DIAMOND THE SIZE OF A YO-YO.

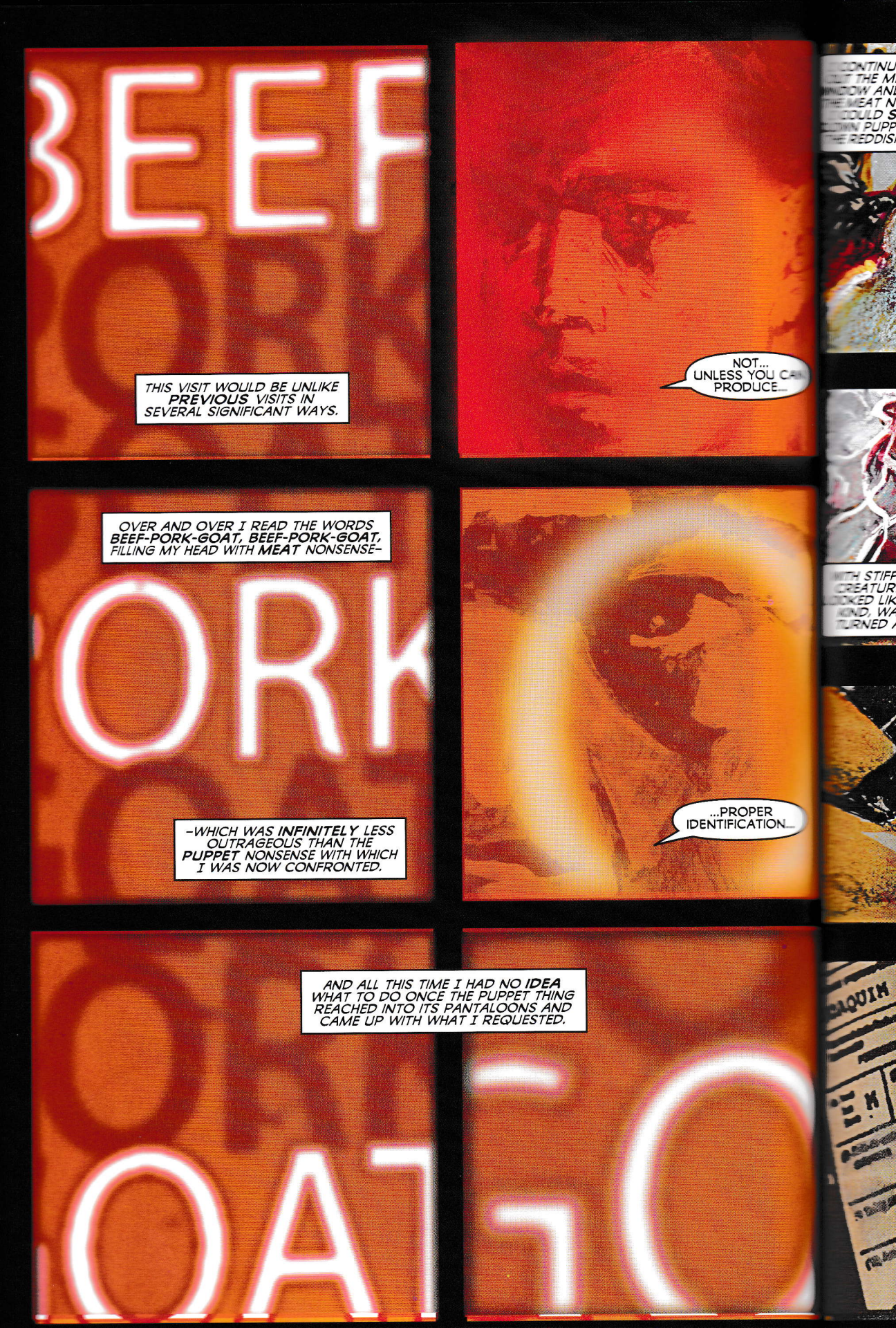
WELL, LET S SEE IT!
AS BIG AS A YO-YO!

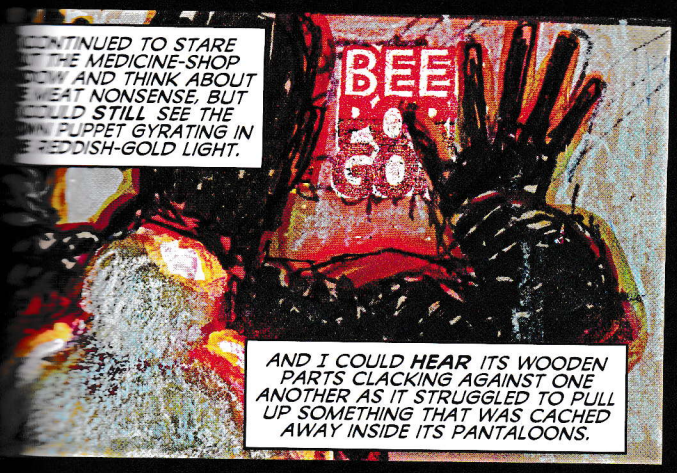
NOT ONLY DID IT COME UP WITH AN EXQUISITELY CUT DIAMOND THAT WAS, GENERALLY SPEAKING, THE SIZE OF A YO-YO–

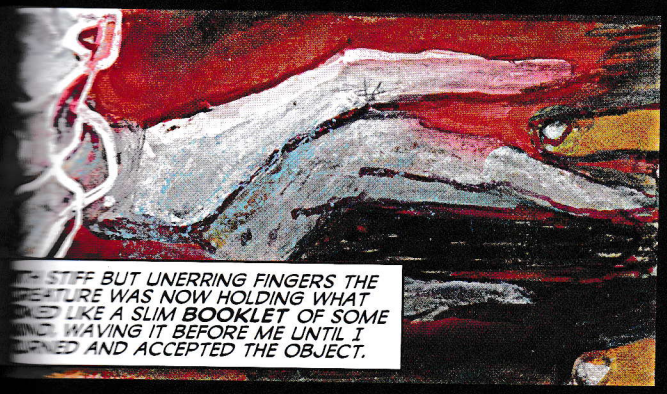

–BUT THE OBJECT THAT THE PUPPET THING FLASHED BEFORE MY EYES WAS ALSO MADE IN THE FORM OF A YO-YO...


NOW, AS I STOOD BEHIND THE COUNTER OF THE MEDICINE SHOP STARING AT THE SCRAWLS AND SCRIBBLES ON THAT PAGE TORN FROM THE OLD PRESCRIPTION PAD, I KNEW THAT IT WAS **POINTLESS** TO TEST THE CLOWN PUPPET IN ANY WAY.
THUS I TRIED ONLY TO PLAY MY **PART** AS CLOSE AS POSSIBLE TO THE **SCRIPT** I IMAGINED HAD ALREADY BEEN WRITTEN–
–THOUGH BY WHOM OR WHAT I COULD HAVE **NO** IDEA...
COULD YOU PLEASE SHOW ME SOME PROPER ***IDENTIFICATION?***

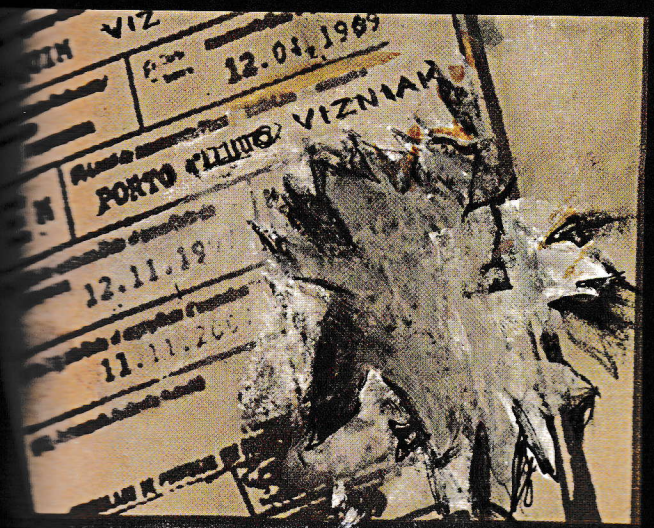
I CANNOT DISPENSE...
...THIS PRESCRIPTION.
I LOOKED AWAY FROM THE CREATURE'S PALE AND PASTY CLOWN FACE AND ITS **DEAD PUPPET** EYES, GAZING INSTEAD THROUGH THE MEDICINE-SHOP WINDOW...


BEEF
THIS VISIT WOULD BE UNLIKE PREVIOUS VISITS IN SEVERAL SIGNIFICANT WAYS.
NOT... UNLESS YOU CA PRODUCE...
OVER AND OVER I READ THE WORDS BEEF-PORK-GOAT, BEEF-PORK-GOAT, FILLING MY HEAD WITH MEAT NONSENSE-
ORK
-WHICH WAS INFINITELY LESS OUTRAGEOUS THAN THE PUPPET NONSENSE WITH WHICH I WAS NOW CONFRONTED.
...PROPER IDENTIFICATION...
AND ALL THIS TIME I HAD NO IDEA WHAT TO DO ONCE THE PUPPET THING REACHED INTO ITS PANTALOONS AND CAME UP WITH WHAT I REQUESTED.
OAT
GO

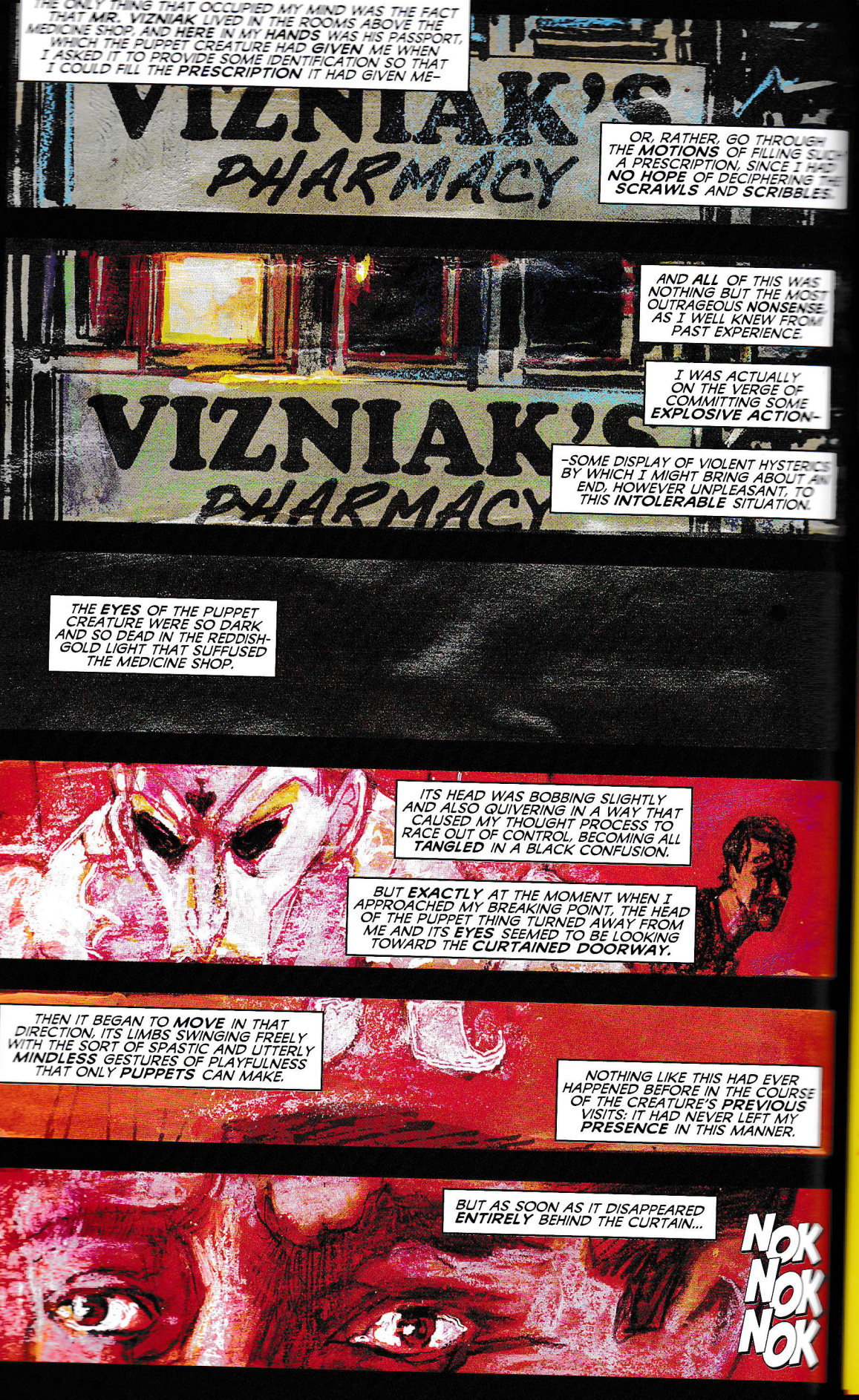

...CONTINUED TO STARE ...THE MEDICINE-SHOP ...DOW AND THINK ABOUT ...E WEAT NONSENSE, BUT ...COULD STILL SEE THE ...WN PUPPET GYRATING IN ...E REDDISH-GOLD LIGHT.
AND I COULD HEAR ITS WOODEN PARTS CLACKING AGAINST ONE ANOTHER AS IT STRUGGLED TO PULL UP SOMETHING THAT WAS CACHED AWAY INSIDE ITS PANTALOONS.


...TH STIFF BUT UNERRING FINGERS THE ...EATURE WAS NOW HOLDING WHAT ...ED LIKE A SLIM BOOKLET OF SOME ...WAVING IT BEFORE ME UNTIL I ...RNED AND ACCEPTED THE OBJECT.

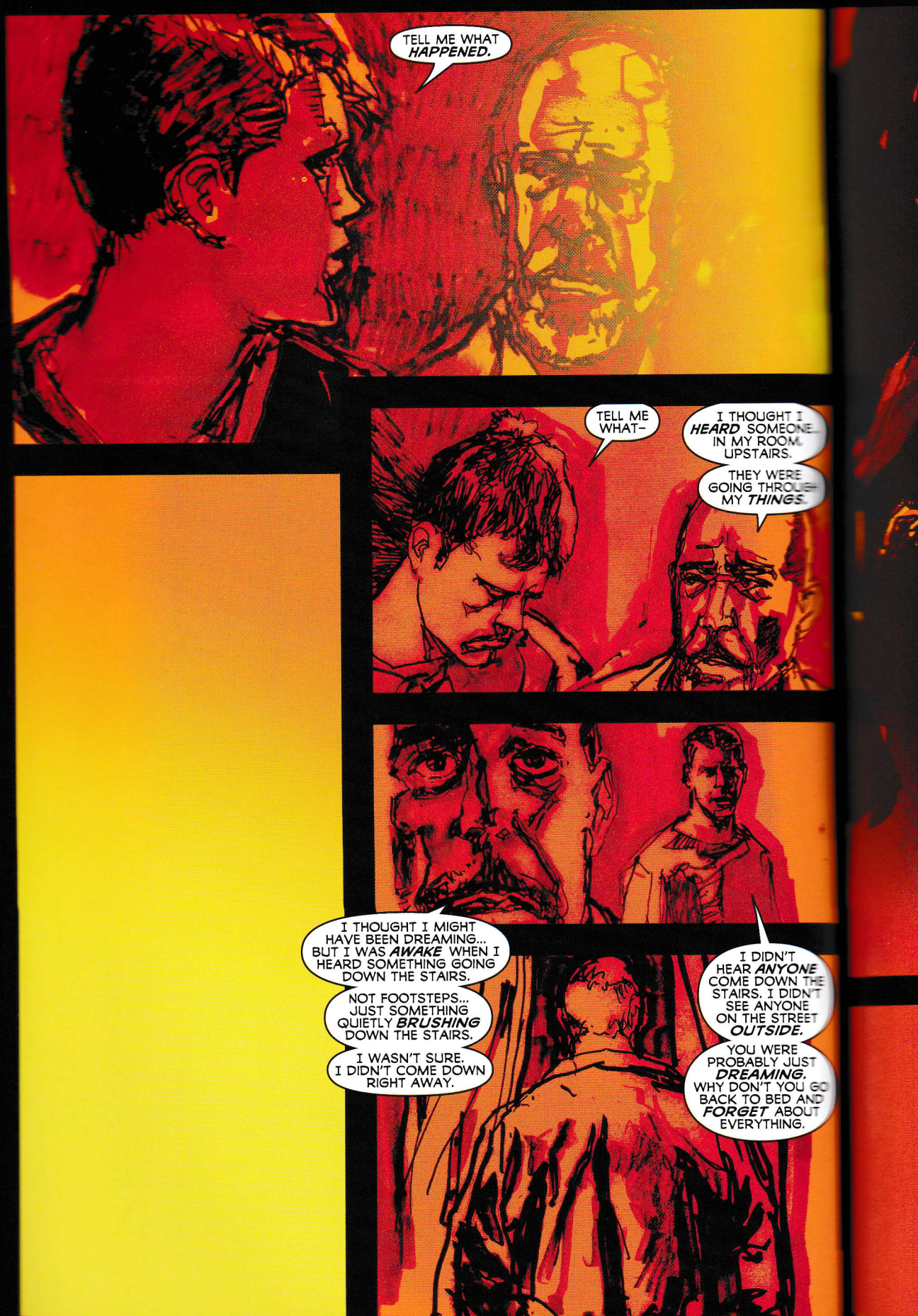
I SAW IT WAS AN OLD PASSPORT WITH NO WORDS THAT I RECOGNIZED SAVE THOSE OF ITS RIGHTFUL OWNER...

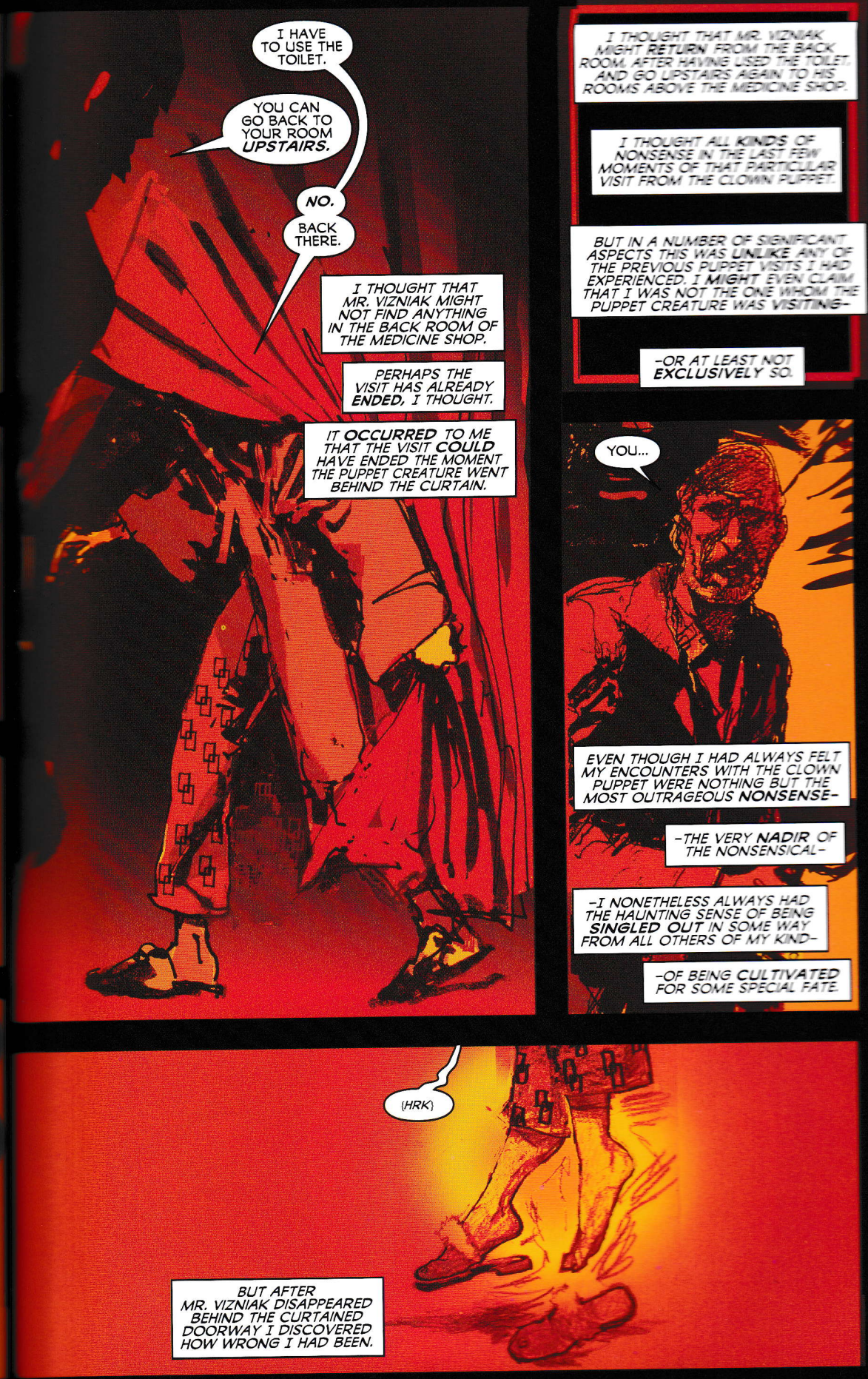

VIZ
12.01.1969
PORTO FRANCO
VIZNIAK
12.11.19
11.11.26

NOTHING LIKE THIS HAD EVER OCCURRED DURING ONE OF THESE PUPPET VISITS.
NO ONE ELSE HAD EVER BEEN INVOLVED IN ANY OF THE ENCOUNTERS I HAD HAD OVER THE YEARS WITH THE CLOWN PUPPET, AND I WAS NOW AT A LOSS FOR MY NEXT MOVE.


THE ONLY THING THAT OCCUPIED MY MIND WAS THE FACT THAT MR. VIZNIAK LIVED IN THE ROOMS ABOVE THE MEDICINE SHOP, AND HERE IN MY HANDS WAS HIS PASSPORT, WHICH THE PUPPET CREATURE HAD GIVEN ME WHEN I ASKED IT TO PROVIDE SOME IDENTIFICATION SO THAT I COULD FILL THE PRESCRIPTION IT HAD GIVEN ME–
VIZNIAK'S PHARMACY
OR, RATHER, GO THROUGH THE MOTIONS OF FILLING SUCH A PRESCRIPTION, SINCE I HAD NO HOPE OF DECIPHERING THE SCRAWLS AND SCRIBBLES.
AND ALL OF THIS WAS NOTHING BUT THE MOST OUTRAGEOUS NONSENSE, AS I WELL KNEW FROM PAST EXPERIENCE.
I WAS ACTUALLY ON THE VERGE OF COMMITTING SOME EXPLOSIVE ACTION–
–SOME DISPLAY OF VIOLENT HYSTERICS BY WHICH I MIGHT BRING ABOUT AN END, HOWEVER UNPLEASANT, TO THIS INTOLERABLE SITUATION.
VIZNIAK'S PHARMACY
THE EYES OF THE PUPPET CREATURE WERE SO DARK AND SO DEAD IN THE REDDISH-GOLD LIGHT THAT SUFFUSED THE MEDICINE SHOP.
ITS HEAD WAS BOBBING SLIGHTLY AND ALSO QUIVERING IN A WAY THAT CAUSED MY THOUGHT PROCESS TO RACE OUT OF CONTROL, BECOMING ALL TANGLED IN A BLACK CONFUSION.
BUT EXACTLY AT THE MOMENT WHEN I APPROACHED MY BREAKING POINT, THE HEAD OF THE PUPPET THING TURNED AWAY FROM ME AND ITS EYES SEEMED TO BE LOOKING TOWARD THE CURTAINED DOORWAY.
THEN IT BEGAN TO MOVE IN THAT DIRECTION, ITS LIMBS SWINGING FREELY WITH THE SORT OF SPASTIC AND UTTERLY MINDLESS GESTURES OF PLAYFULNESS THAT ONLY PUPPETS CAN MAKE.
NOTHING LIKE THIS HAD EVER HAPPENED BEFORE IN THE COURSE OF THE CREATURE'S PREVIOUS VISITS: IT HAD NEVER LEFT MY PRESENCE IN THIS MANNER.
BUT AS SOON AS IT DISAPPEARED ENTIRELY BEHIND THE CURTAIN...
NOK NOK NOK

OPEN THE DOOR...
SOMETHING HAS HAPPENED!
OPEN
ANOTHER PERSON IS ABOUT TO ENTER THE PLACE WHERE ONE OF THESE VISITS IS OCCURRING, I THOUGHT TO MYSELF.
BUT THERE SEEMED NOTHING I COULD DO, NOTHING I COULD SAY. WITH THE CLOWN PUPPET ONLY A FEET AWAY IN THE BACK ROOM.
EVERYTHING IS ALL RIGHT.
GO BACK TO BED. WE CAN TALK ABOUT IT IN THE MORNING.
THE LIGHT... THE LIGHT...

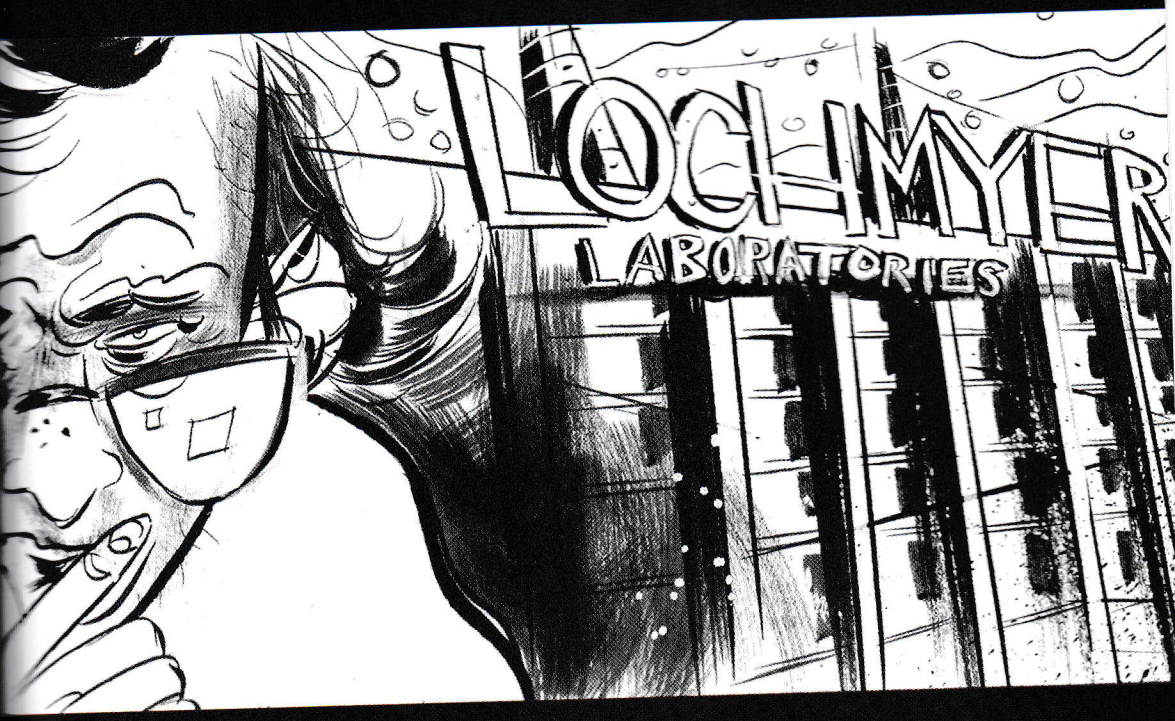

TELL ME WHAT HAPPENED.
TELL ME WHAT-
I THOUGHT I HEARD SOMEONE... IN MY ROOM. UPSTAIRS.
THEY WERE GOING THROUGH MY THINGS.
I THOUGHT I MIGHT HAVE BEEN DREAMING... BUT I WAS AWAKE WHEN I HEARD SOMETHING GOING DOWN THE STAIRS.
NOT FOOTSTEPS... JUST SOMETHING QUIETLY BRUSHING DOWN THE STAIRS.
I WASN'T SURE. I DIDN'T COME DOWN RIGHT AWAY.
I DIDN'T HEAR ANYONE COME DOWN THE STAIRS. I DIDN'T SEE ANYONE ON THE STREET OUTSIDE.
YOU WERE PROBABLY JUST DREAMING. WHY DON'T YOU GO BACK TO BED AND FORGET ABOUT EVERYTHING.


I HAVE TO USE THE TOILET.
YOU CAN GO BACK TO YOUR ROOM UPSTAIRS.
NO.
BACK THERE.
I THOUGHT THAT MR. VIZNIAK MIGHT NOT FIND ANYTHING IN THE BACK ROOM OF THE MEDICINE SHOP.
PERHAPS THE VISIT HAS ALREADY ENDED, I THOUGHT.
IT OCCURRED TO ME THAT THE VISIT COULD HAVE ENDED THE MOMENT THE PUPPET CREATURE WENT BEHIND THE CURTAIN.
I THOUGHT THAT MR. VIZNIAK MIGHT RETURN FROM THE BACK ROOM, AFTER HAVING USED THE TOILET, AND GO UPSTAIRS AGAIN TO HIS ROOMS ABOVE THE MEDICINE SHOP.
I THOUGHT ALL KINDS OF NONSENSE IN THE LAST FEW MOMENTS OF THAT PARTICULAR VISIT FROM THE CLOWN PUPPET.
BUT IN A NUMBER OF SIGNIFICANT ASPECTS THIS WAS UNLIKE ANY OF THE PREVIOUS PUPPET VISITS I HAD EXPERIENCED. I MIGHT EVEN CLAIM THAT I WAS NOT THE ONE WHOM THE PUPPET CREATURE WAS VISITING–
–OR AT LEAST NOT EXCLUSIVELY SO.
YOU...
EVEN THOUGH I HAD ALWAYS FELT MY ENCOUNTERS WITH THE CLOWN PUPPET WERE NOTHING BUT THE MOST OUTRAGEOUS NONSENSE–
–THE VERY NADIR OF THE NONSENSICAL–
–I NONETHELESS ALWAYS HAD THE HAUNTING SENSE OF BEING SINGLED OUT IN SOME WAY FROM ALL OTHERS OF MY KIND–
–OF BEING CULTIVATED FOR SOME SPECIAL FATE.
(HRK)
BUT AFTER MR. VIZNIAK DISAPPEARED BEHIND THE CURTAINED DOORWAY I DISCOVERED HOW WRONG I HAD BEEN.

GET AWAY FROM ME!
WHO KNOWS HOW MANY OTHERS THERE WERE WHO MIGHT SAY THAT THEIR EXISTENCE CONSISTED OF NOTHING BUT THE MOST OUTRAGEOUS NONSENSE–
–A NONSENSE THAT HAD NOTHING UNIQUE ABOUT IT AT ALL. THAT HAD NOTHING BEHIND IT OR BEYOND IT EXCEPT MORE AND MORE NONSENSE–
–A NEW ORDER OF NONSENSE–
–PERHAPS AN UTTERLY UNKNOWN NONSENSE–
–BUT ALL OF IT NONSENSE AND NOTHING BUT NONSENSE.
THE MEDICINE SHOP WAS ONLY A PUPPET PLACE LIKE ALL THE OTHERS.
I CAME THERE TO WORK BEHIND THE COUNTER AND WAIT FOR MY VISIT...BUT I HAD NO IDEA UNTIL THAT NIGHT THAT MR. VIZNIAK WAS ALSO WAITING FOR HIS.
YET IT SEEMED HE WAS SURPRISED BY WHAT HE FOUND BACK THERE. AND THIS IS THE MOST OUTRAGEOUSLY NONSENSICAL THING OF ALL.
MR. VIZNIAK'S VOICE FADED QUICKLY OUT OF EARSHOT, AS THOUGH HE WERE BEING CARRIED AWAY AT INCREDIBLE VELOCITY TOWARD SOME GREAT HEIGHT.

I TOLD MYSELF AT THAT MOMENT THAT I WOULD NOT BE SURPRISED WHEN MY TIME CAME.

NO DOUBT, MR. VIZNIAK, AT SOME TIME, HAD TOLD HIMSELF THE **SAME,** UTTERLY NONSENSICAL THING.
THE END



THE CHYMIST

Introduction

A familiar figure in horror entertainment, as we all know, is the mad scientist. He is often the brainiac who devises a plan with the best of intentions only to see that plan backfire on him and his subjects. Such is the case with two of the best B-movie mad scientists ever created.

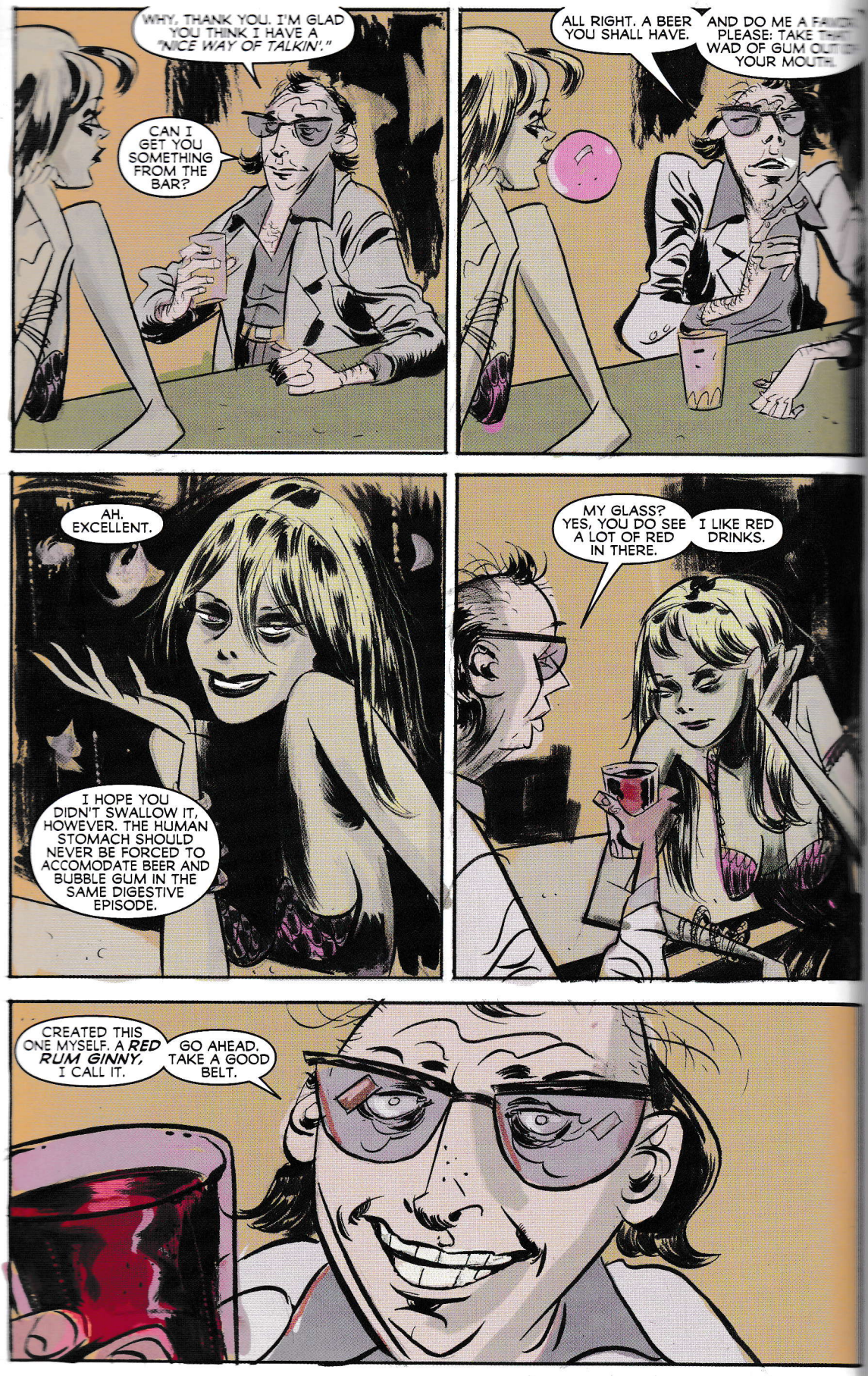
The first is the scientist in *The Unearthly* (1957). His only aim is to make the lives of his subjects better by making them longer. He performs experiments in out-of-the-way clinics where unsuspecting people come seeking answers more often than treatments. It is here in one of these clinics that this particular mad scientist turns a scrawny man of some intelligence into a hulking goon. He also turns a once beautiful woman into a recluse with a skin condition so hideous that no dermatologist dare touch it. In the final scene of the movie, the police who are brought in to take him away soon discover that the scientist has been far busier than anyone had ever imagined. In the laboratory's cellar there is a jail cell where his worst disasters are housed—a collection of monstrosities so reviling none are even close to being recognized as human.

The other great B-movie mad scientist plies his unnatural trade in *The Manster* (1962). This particular genius is a world-famous Japanese doctor who lures an American news reporter to his laboratory with the promise of an exclusive interview. The news turns out to be all bad for the reporter when the doctor drugs him, injecting him with a potent serum intended to produce evolutionary changes chemically. Instead it causes the reporter to grow a second head and unleashes in him a thirst for murder. Just how heinous this doctor is becomes apparent when he confesses to the police who are called to arrest him that the mutant creature he has been keeping in a cage below his lab was once his beloved wife.

These are, of course, the sad cases in the world of mad scientists. Far happier in his work is the protagonist of "The Chymist," who calls himself Simon after the legendary sorcerer Simon Magus. Unlike his brethren in *The Unearthly* and *The Manster*, he is not at all hell-bent on upgrading nature. By contrast, he is quite at one with it. He loves the transmutations it engenders, especially those that alchemize our cities into ever-changing degenerate urban jungles. Simon's only desire, in fact, is to emulate and cooperate with nature, this great and wondrous chemist. Unlike the others in his genre, Simon is not taken away by the police, nor does he suffer due to his experiments. The lesson here is not to go against nature's ways, but to follow them.

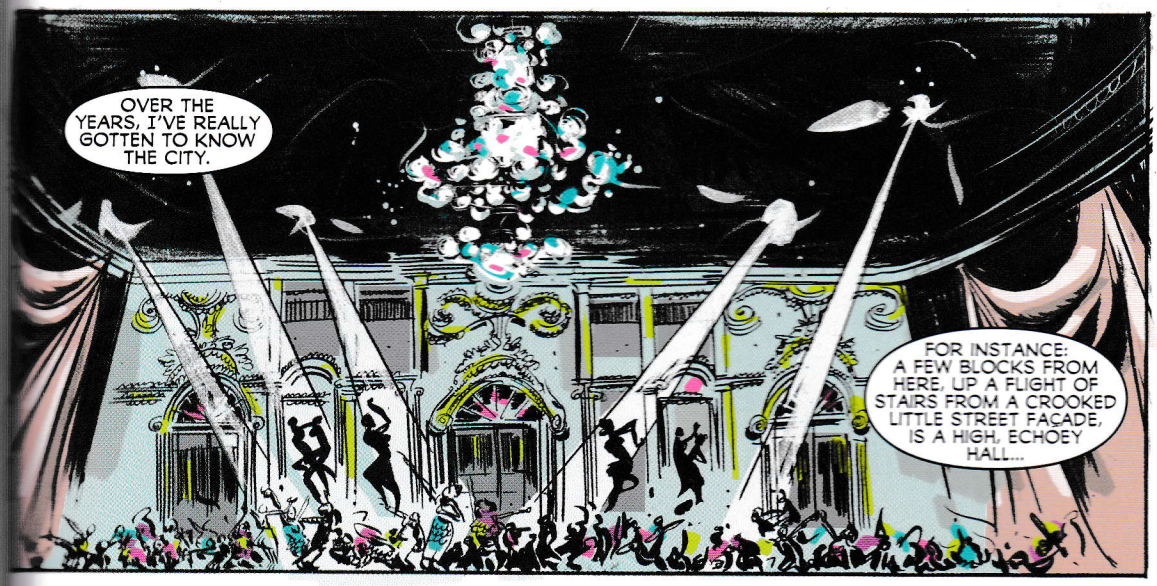
—J.L.

HELLO, MISS.
WHY, YES... I AM LOOKING FOR SOME COMPANY THIS EVENING.
MY NAME IS SIMON.
AND YOU ARE...
...ROSEMARY.
ROSEMARY.
ROSE, ROSIE, ROSEBUD. A ROSE IS A ROSE IS A ROSE...
NEVER MIND. PLEASE...
SIT.


WHY, THANK YOU. I'M GLAD YOU THINK I HAVE A "NICE WAY OF TALKIN'."
CAN I GET YOU SOMETHING FROM THE BAR?
ALL RIGHT. A BEER YOU SHALL HAVE.
AND DO ME A FAVOR, PLEASE: TAKE THAT WAD OF GUM OUT OF YOUR MOUTH.
AH. EXCELLENT.
I HOPE YOU DIDN'T SWALLOW IT, HOWEVER. THE HUMAN STOMACH SHOULD NEVER BE FORCED TO ACCOMODATE BEER AND BUBBLE GUM IN THE SAME DIGESTIVE EPISODE.
MY GLASS? YES, YOU DO SEE A LOT OF RED IN THERE.
I LIKE RED DRINKS.
CREATED THIS ONE MYSELF. A *RED RUM GINNY,* I CALL IT.
GO AHEAD. TAKE A GOOD BELT.

MY BRIEFCASE? YES, THERE ARE PAPERS IN THERE RELATING TO MY WORK.
AMONG OTHER THINGS.
WHAT WORK?
LOCHMYER LABORATORIES
WELL, I SUPPOSE I CAN TELL YOU. I'M EMPLOYED BY A PHARMACEUTICAL COMPANY DOWN BY THE WAREHOUSE DISTRICT.
I'M A CHEMIST THERE.
YES, REALLY.
WELL, IT'S NICE THE WAY YOU COULD SEE RIGHT OFF THAT I "WASN'T NO AVERAGE GUY JUST COMIN' ROUND AFTER WORK, LOOKIN' FOR SOME FUN."
PERCEPTIVE GIRL.

OH, I WOULDN'T SAY THAT THIS PART OF TOWN IS SIMPLY A *PIT.*
IT *IS,* OF COURSE...BUT THAT WORD DOESN'T BEGIN TO DESCRIBE THE DIMENSIONS OF ITS DECREPITUDE.
DECREPITUDE, RO.
IT HAS YOUR *PIT* IN IT, AND A LOT MORE BESIDES.
LOCHMYER LABORATORIES
CH RCH OF DIVID NG LI HT
NIGHTLY ENTERTAINMENT
BREWERY
HOTEL
THIS WHOLE CITY IS A PITIFUL CORPSE, AND THE NEIGHBORHOOD OUTSIDE THIS BAR IS THE WITHERING HEART OF THE DECEASED.


OVER THE YEARS, I'VE REALLY GOTTEN TO KNOW THE CITY.
FOR INSTANCE: A FEW BLOCKS FROM HERE, UP A FLIGHT OF STAIRS FROM A CROOKED LITTLE STREET FAÇADE, IS A HIGH, ECHOEY HALL...

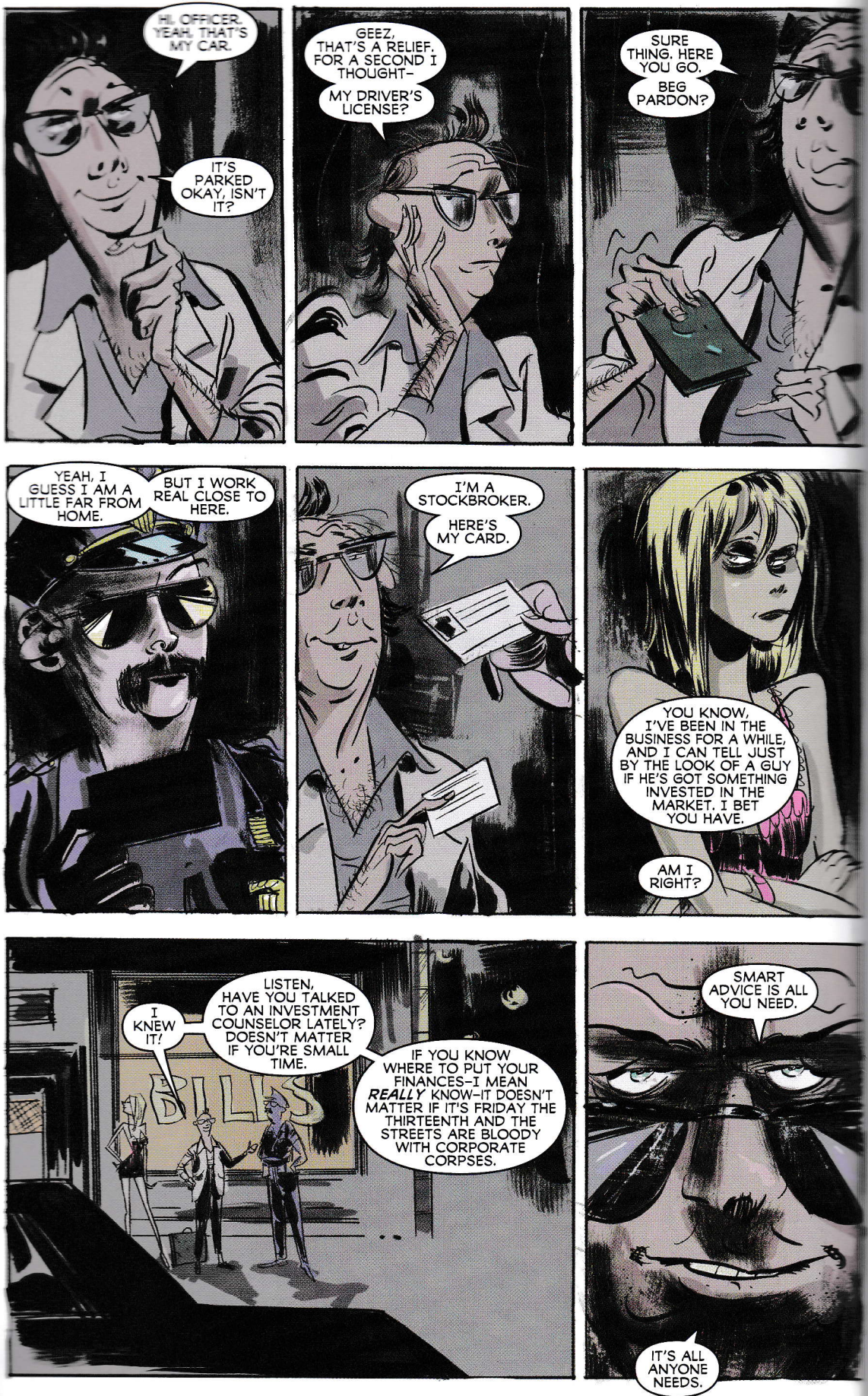
...AN OLD DREAM WITH A SHINY NEW VENEER.
SECONDHAND FANTASIES AND ANTIQUATED HYSTERIA.

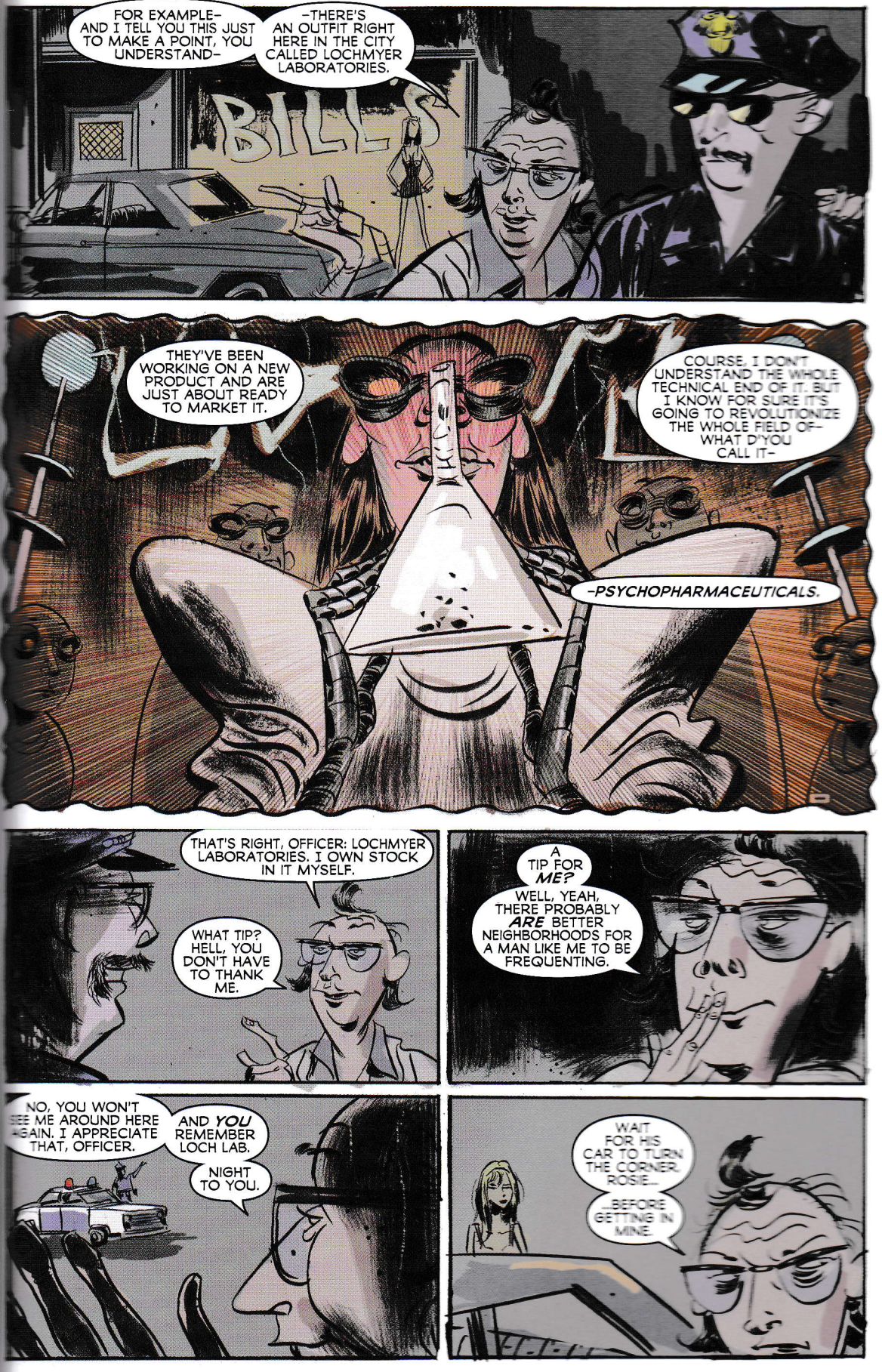
OVER ON THIRD AND SNOVILLE STANDS THE *CHURCH OF THE TRUE DIVIDING LIGHT.*
NOT TO BE MISTAKEN, I PRESUME, FOR THAT FALSE LIGHT WHICH DAZZLES SO MANY SEARCHING EYES.

I TELL YOU, ROSALIE...
NO ONE WORSHIPS THIS CITY AS I DO.

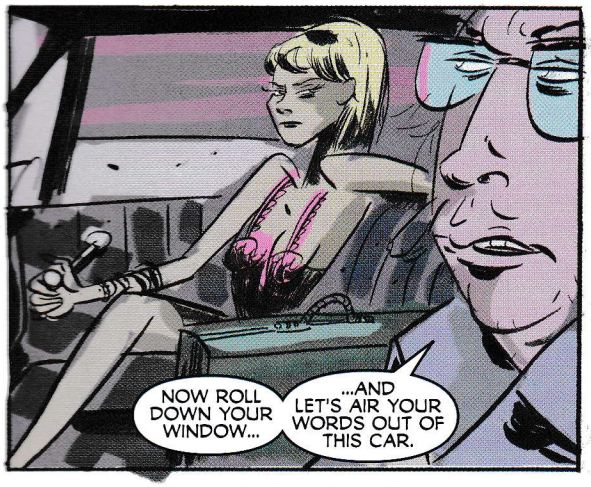
YES, I UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU MEAN WHEN YOU SAY YOU DON'T NOTICE THAT STUFF. THE MIND BECOMES DULL AND COMPLACENT.
SOMETIMES I GET THAT WAY MYSELF.
BUT JUST WHEN I'M MIRED IN COMPLACENCY, SOME JOLT ALWAYS COMES ALONG.
MAYBE I'M SITTING IN MY CAR, WAITING FOR A RED LIGHT TO CHANGE.
...WHEN A DERELICT COMES UP TO MY DEFENSELESS VEHICLE AND POUNDS ON MY WINDOWS WITH BOTH FISTS, DEMANDING A CIGARETTE.
A CIGARETTE? INDEED!
THE LIGHT CHANGES AND I DRIVE ON, WATCHING THE BUMS HALF-COLLAPSED FORM SHRINK IN MY REAR-VIEW MIRROR...
...BUT SOMEHOW I'VE TAKEN HIM ON AS A PASSENGER. A GHOSTLY SHAPE RAVING ABOUT ALL KINDS OF SENSELESS AND FASCINATING THINGS.
THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF CONFUSION.
AND IN A LITTLE WHILE, I'M BACK ON THE LOOKOUT ONCE MORE.

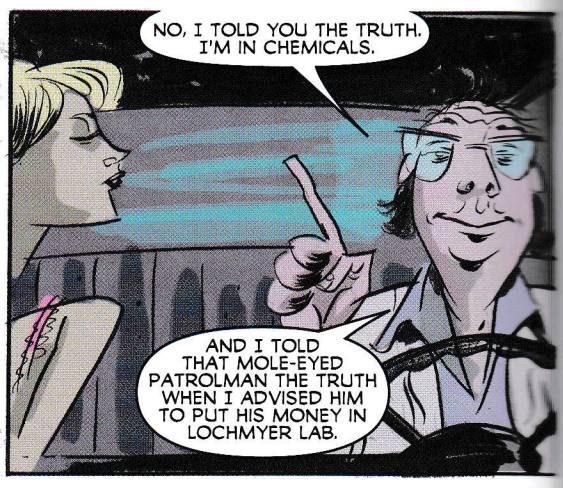
YES, I SUPPOSE IT IS GETTING LATE AND WE HAVEN'T MADE MUCH PROGRESS.
YOUR APARTMENT? THAT WOULD BE FINE.
MY CAR IS PARKED RIGHT OUT FRONT.
I DO HOPE IT HASN'T DECIDED TO RAIN...
OH DEAR.
YOU'RE NOT, BY CHANCE, A VICE OFFICER IN DISGUISE...ARE YOU, ROSIECRANTZ? YOU WOULDN'T BETRAY THIS UNSUSPECTING HAMLET?
A SIMPLE "NO" WOULD HAVE BEEN SUFFICIENT.
PLEASE DON'T USE THAT KIND OF LANGUAGE AGAIN.
NOW SILENCE.
LET ME DO THE TALKING.

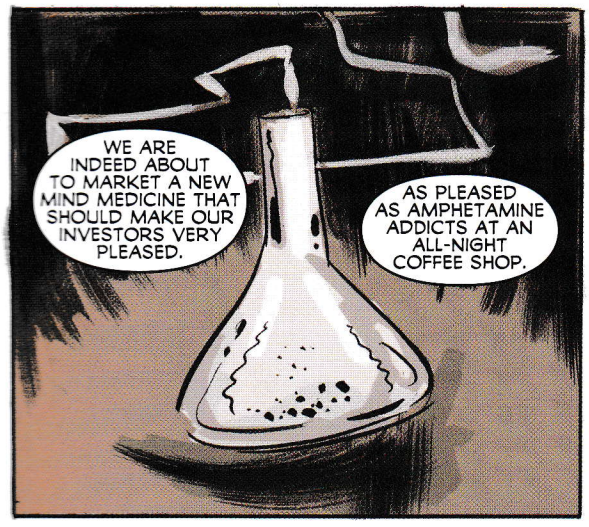

HI, OFFICER. YEAH, THAT'S MY CAR.
IT'S PARKED OKAY, ISN'T IT?
GEEZ, THAT'S A RELIEF. FOR A SECOND I THOUGHT–
MY DRIVER'S LICENSE?
SURE THING. HERE YOU GO.
BEG PARDON?
YEAH, I GUESS I AM A LITTLE FAR FROM HOME.
BUT I WORK REAL CLOSE TO HERE.
I'M A STOCKBROKER.
HERE'S MY CARD.
YOU KNOW, I'VE BEEN IN THE BUSINESS FOR A WHILE, AND I CAN TELL JUST BY THE LOOK OF A GUY IF HE'S GOT SOMETHING INVESTED IN THE MARKET. I BET YOU HAVE.
AM I RIGHT?
I KNEW IT!
LISTEN, HAVE YOU TALKED TO AN INVESTMENT COUNSELOR LATELY? DOESN'T MATTER IF YOU'RE SMALL TIME.
IF YOU KNOW WHERE TO PUT YOUR FINANCES–I MEAN *REALLY* KNOW–IT DOESN'T MATTER IF IT'S FRIDAY THE THIRTEENTH AND THE STREETS ARE BLOODY WITH CORPORATE CORPSES.
BILLS
SMART ADVICE IS ALL YOU NEED.
IT'S ALL ANYONE NEEDS.


FOR EXAMPLE– AND I TELL YOU THIS JUST TO MAKE A POINT, YOU UNDERSTAND–
–THERE'S AN OUTFIT RIGHT HERE IN THE CITY CALLED LOCHMYER LABORATORIES.
BILL'S
THEY'VE BEEN WORKING ON A NEW PRODUCT AND ARE JUST ABOUT READY TO MARKET IT.
COURSE, I DON'T UNDERSTAND THE WHOLE TECHNICAL END OF IT. BUT I KNOW FOR SURE IT'S GOING TO REVOLUTIONIZE THE WHOLE FIELD OF– WHAT D'YOU CALL IT–
–PSYCHOPHARMACEUTICALS.
THAT'S RIGHT, OFFICER: LOCHMYER LABORATORIES. I OWN STOCK IN IT MYSELF.
WHAT TIP? HELL, YOU DON'T HAVE TO THANK ME.
A TIP FOR *ME?*
WELL, YEAH, THERE PROBABLY *ARE* BETTER NEIGHBORHOODS FOR A MAN LIKE ME TO BE FREQUENTING.
NO, YOU WON'T SEE ME AROUND HERE AGAIN. I APPRECIATE THAT, OFFICER.
AND *YOU* REMEMBER LOCH LAB.
NIGHT TO YOU.
WAIT FOR HIS CAR TO TURN THE CORNER, ROSIE...
...BEFORE GETTING IN MINE.

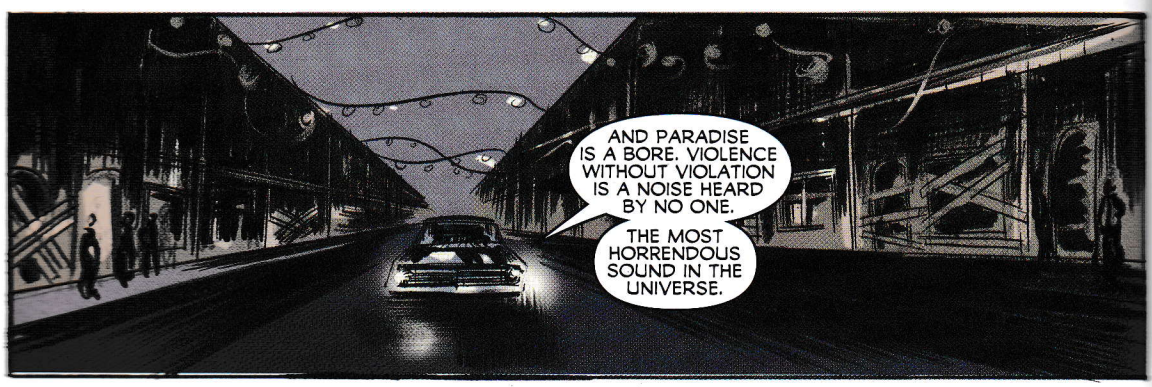
YES, I DID JUST GET US OUT OF A TOUCHY SITUATION. BUT I HOPE WHEN YOU JUST MENTIONED MY B.S., YOU WERE REFERRING TO THE BACHELOR OF SCIENCE DEGREE I RECEIVED AT AGE SIXTEEN.
THIS IS YOUR LAST WARNING ABOUT UNCLEAN IDIOMS.

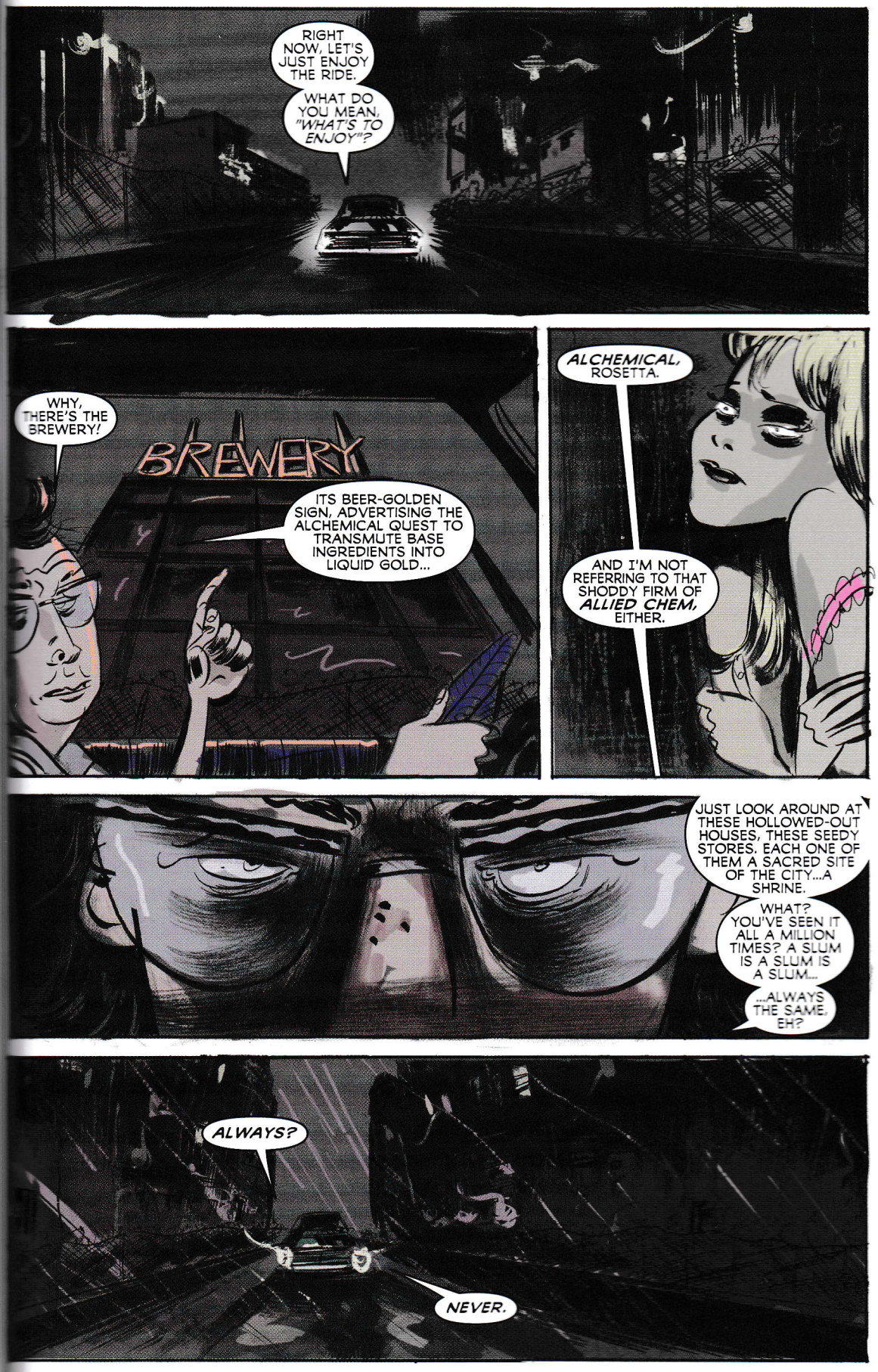

NOW ROLL DOWN YOUR WINDOW...
...AND LET'S AIR YOUR WORDS OUT OF THIS CAR.

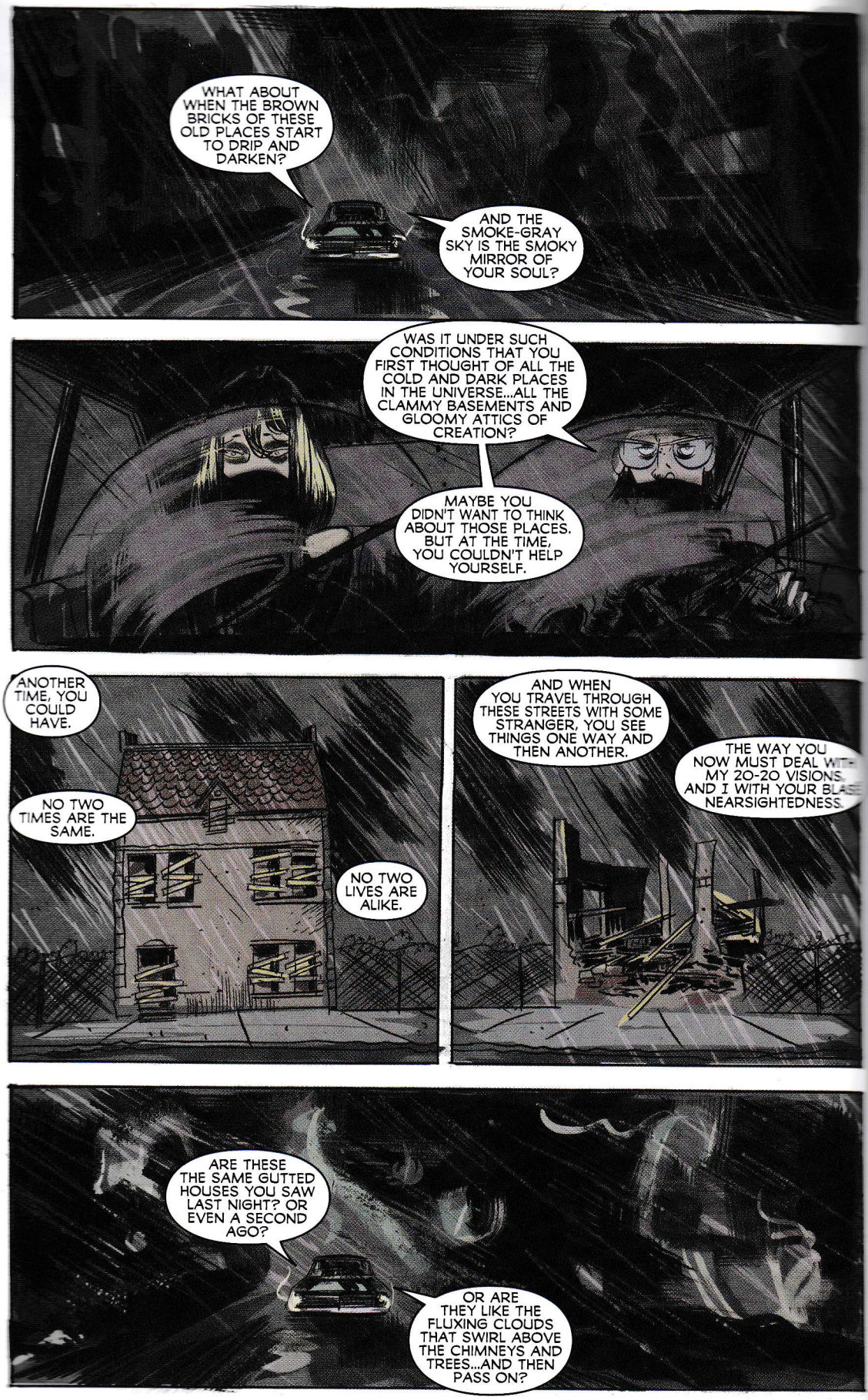

NO, I TOLD YOU THE TRUTH. I'M IN CHEMICALS.
AND I TOLD THAT MOLE-EYED PATROLMAN THE TRUTH WHEN I ADVISED HIM TO PUT HIS MONEY IN LOCHMYER LAB.

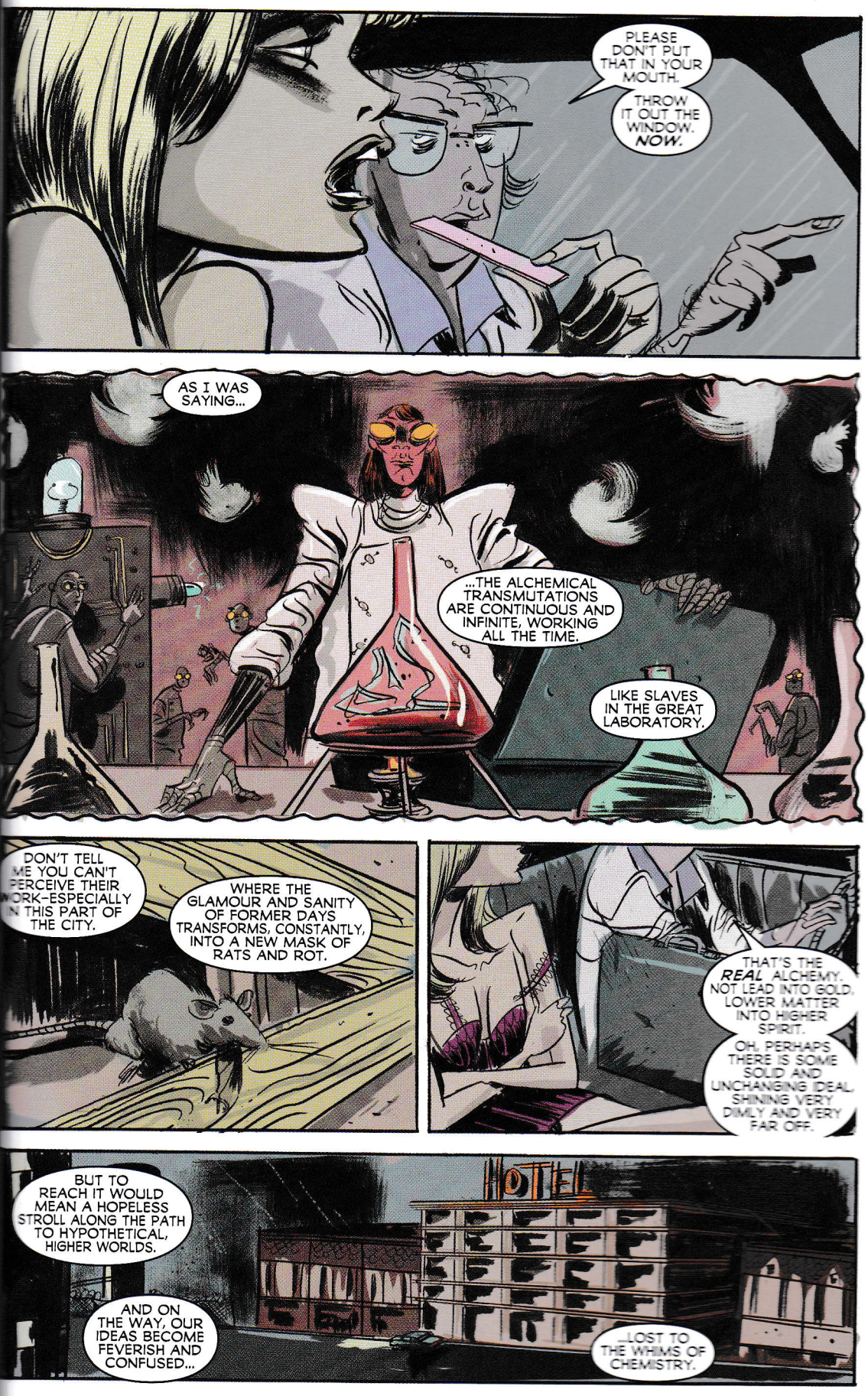

WE ARE INDEED ABOUT TO MARKET A NEW MIND MEDICINE THAT SHOULD MAKE OUR INVESTORS VERY PLEASED.
AS PLEASED AS AMPHETAMINE ADDICTS AT AN ALL-NIGHT COFFEE SHOP.

YOU DON'T MUCH LIKE THE *POLICIA,* DO YOU, RRROSA?
YES, OF COURSE I CAN BLAME YOU. WITHOUT THEM, WHERE WOULD ALL OF US OUTLAWS BE?
IN A LAWLESS PARADISE, THAT'S WHERE.


AND PARADISE IS A BORE. VIOLENCE WITHOUT VIOLATION IS A NOISE HEARD BY NO ONE.
THE MOST HORRENDOUS SOUND IN THE UNIVERSE.

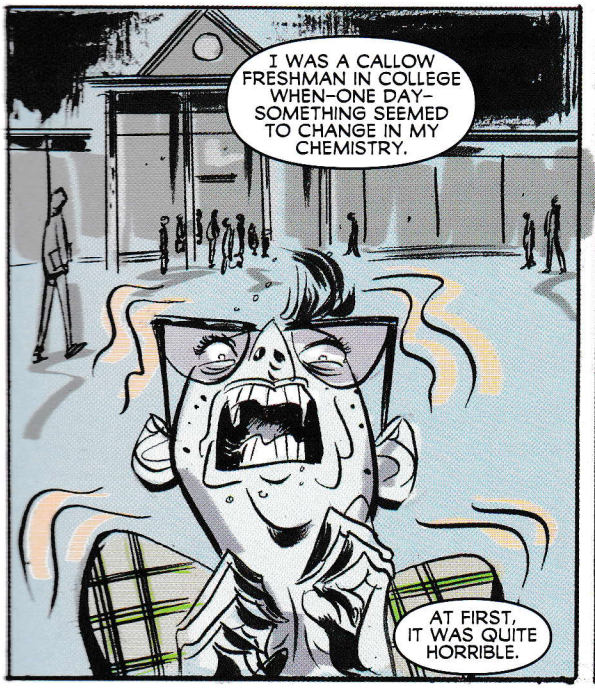

RIGHT NOW, LET'S JUST ENJOY THE RIDE.
WHAT DO YOU MEAN, "WHAT'S TO ENJOY"?
WHY, THERE'S THE BREWERY!
BREWERY
ITS BEER-GOLDEN SIGN, ADVERTISING THE ALCHEMICAL QUEST TO TRANSMUTE BASE INGREDIENTS INTO LIQUID GOLD...
ALCHEMICAL, ROSETTA.
AND I'M NOT REFERRING TO THAT SHODDY FIRM OF ALLIED CHEM, EITHER.
JUST LOOK AROUND AT THESE HOLLOWED-OUT HOUSES, THESE SEEDY STORES. EACH ONE OF THEM A SACRED SITE OF THE CITY...A SHRINE.
WHAT? YOU'VE SEEN IT ALL A MILLION TIMES? A SLUM IS A SLUM IS A SLUM...
...ALWAYS THE SAME, EH?
ALWAYS?
NEVER.


WHAT ABOUT WHEN THE BROWN BRICKS OF THESE OLD PLACES START TO DRIP AND DARKEN?
AND THE SMOKE-GRAY SKY IS THE SMOKY MIRROR OF YOUR SOUL?
WAS IT UNDER SUCH CONDITIONS THAT YOU FIRST THOUGHT OF ALL THE COLD AND DARK PLACES IN THE UNIVERSE...ALL THE CLAMMY BASEMENTS AND GLOOMY ATTICS OF CREATION?
MAYBE YOU DIDN'T WANT TO THINK ABOUT THOSE PLACES. BUT AT THE TIME, YOU COULDN'T HELP YOURSELF.
ANOTHER TIME, YOU COULD HAVE.
NO TWO TIMES ARE THE SAME.
NO TWO LIVES ARE ALIKE.
AND WHEN YOU TRAVEL THROUGH THESE STREETS WITH SOME STRANGER, YOU SEE THINGS ONE WAY AND THEN ANOTHER.
THE WAY YOU NOW MUST DEAL WITH MY 20-20 VISIONS, AND I WITH YOUR BLASE NEARSIGHTEDNESS.
ARE THESE THE SAME GUTTED HOUSES YOU SAW LAST NIGHT? OR EVEN A SECOND AGO?
OR ARE THEY LIKE THE FLUXING CLOUDS THAT SWIRL ABOVE THE CHIMNEYS AND TREES...AND THEN PASS ON?


PLEASE DON'T PUT THAT IN YOUR MOUTH.
THROW IT OUT THE WINDOW. NOW.
AS I WAS SAYING...
...THE ALCHEMICAL TRANSMUTATIONS ARE CONTINUOUS AND INFINITE, WORKING ALL THE TIME.
LIKE SLAVES IN THE GREAT LABORATORY.
DON'T TELL ME YOU CAN'T PERCEIVE THEIR WORK–ESPECIALLY IN THIS PART OF THE CITY.
WHERE THE GLAMOUR AND SANITY OF FORMER DAYS TRANSFORMS, CONSTANTLY, INTO A NEW MASK OF RATS AND ROT.
THAT'S THE REAL ALCHEMY. NOT LEAD INTO GOLD, LOWER MATTER INTO HIGHER SPIRIT.
OH, PERHAPS THERE IS SOME SOLID AND UNCHANGING IDEAL, SHINING VERY DIMLY AND VERY FAR OFF.
BUT TO REACH IT WOULD MEAN A HOPELESS STROLL ALONG THE PATH TO HYPOTHETICAL, HIGHER WORLDS.
AND ON THE WAY, OUR IDEAS BECOME FEVERISH AND CONFUSED...
...LOST TO THE WHIMS OF CHEMISTRY.

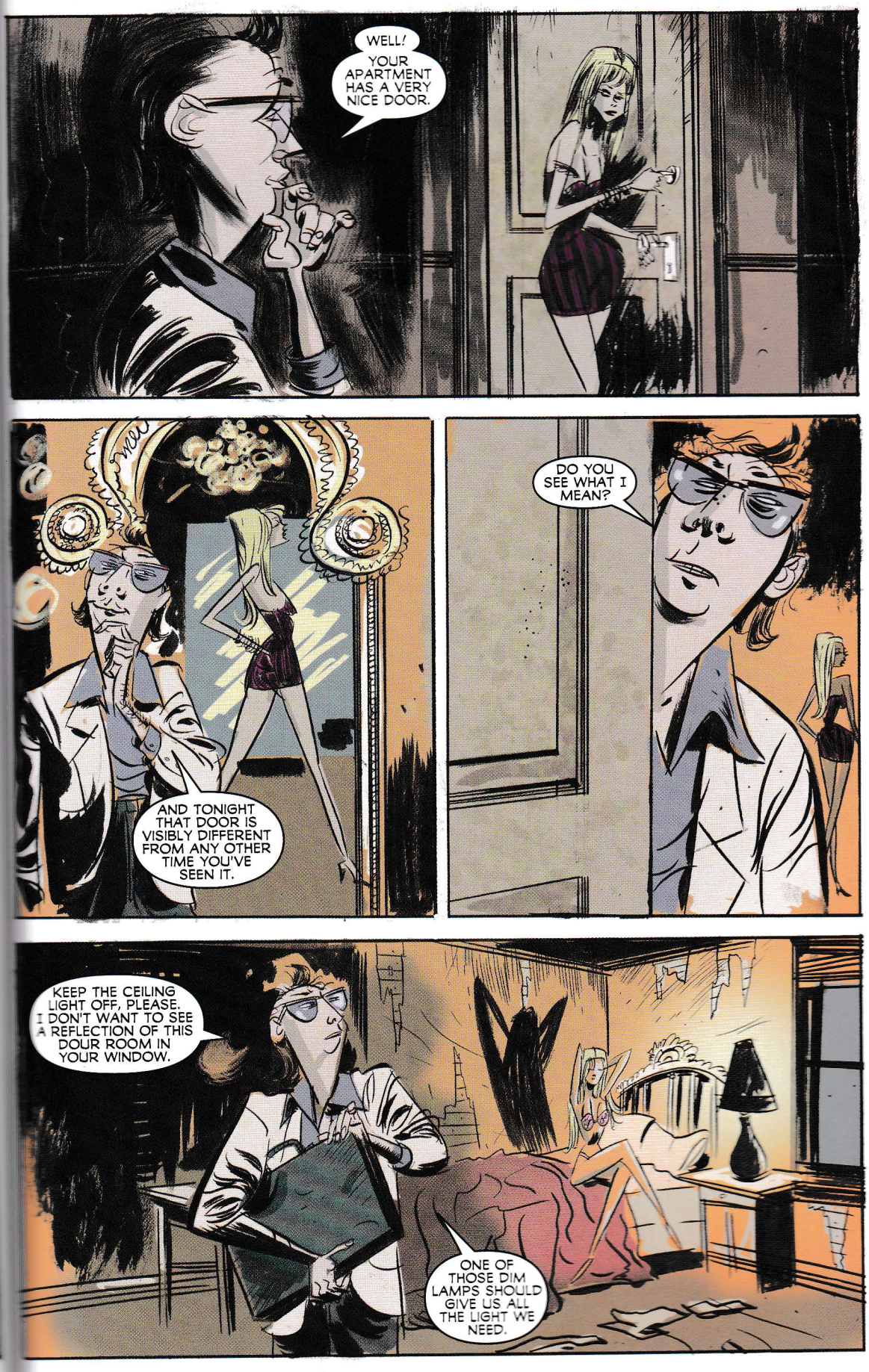
THANK YOU FOR NOT SLAMMING THE CAR DOOR. NO NEED TO DRAW ATTENTION TO OUR PRESENCE.
THOUGH YOU'RE RIGHT... THE LOCAL STREET VERMIN SEEM TO HAVE WITHDRAWN INTO THEIR HOLES.

NO... I DIDN'T ALWAYS "THINK THIS FREAKY," AS YOU PUT IT.
I CAN TELL YOU PRECISELY WHEN I BEGAN TO SEE THE TRUTH OF THINGS.


I WAS A CALLOW FRESHMAN IN COLLEGE WHEN–ONE DAY– SOMETHING SEEMED TO CHANGE IN MY CHEMISTRY.
AT FIRST, IT WAS QUITE HORRIBLE.

EVENTUALLY, THOUGH, I REALIZED THAT THE ALTERATION WAS FROM A *FALSE* CHEMISTRY TO A *TRUE* ONE.
THAT'S WHEN I DECIDED TO PURSUE THE SUBJECT AS MY CAREER. MY *CALLING.*

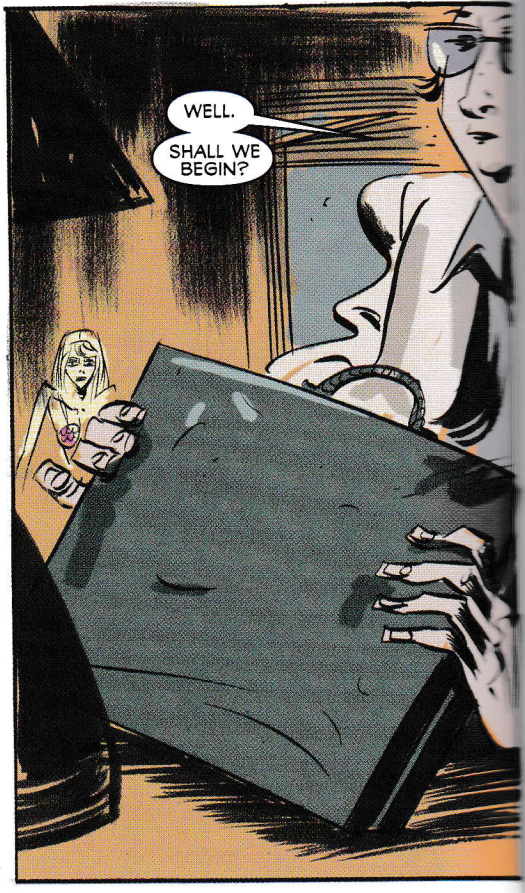
COZY LITTLE STAIRWELL. AND I'LL BET YOUR PLACE IS DOWN THIS WAY.
SEE? I AM ALWAYS RIGHT.
ISN'T THAT FUNNY?

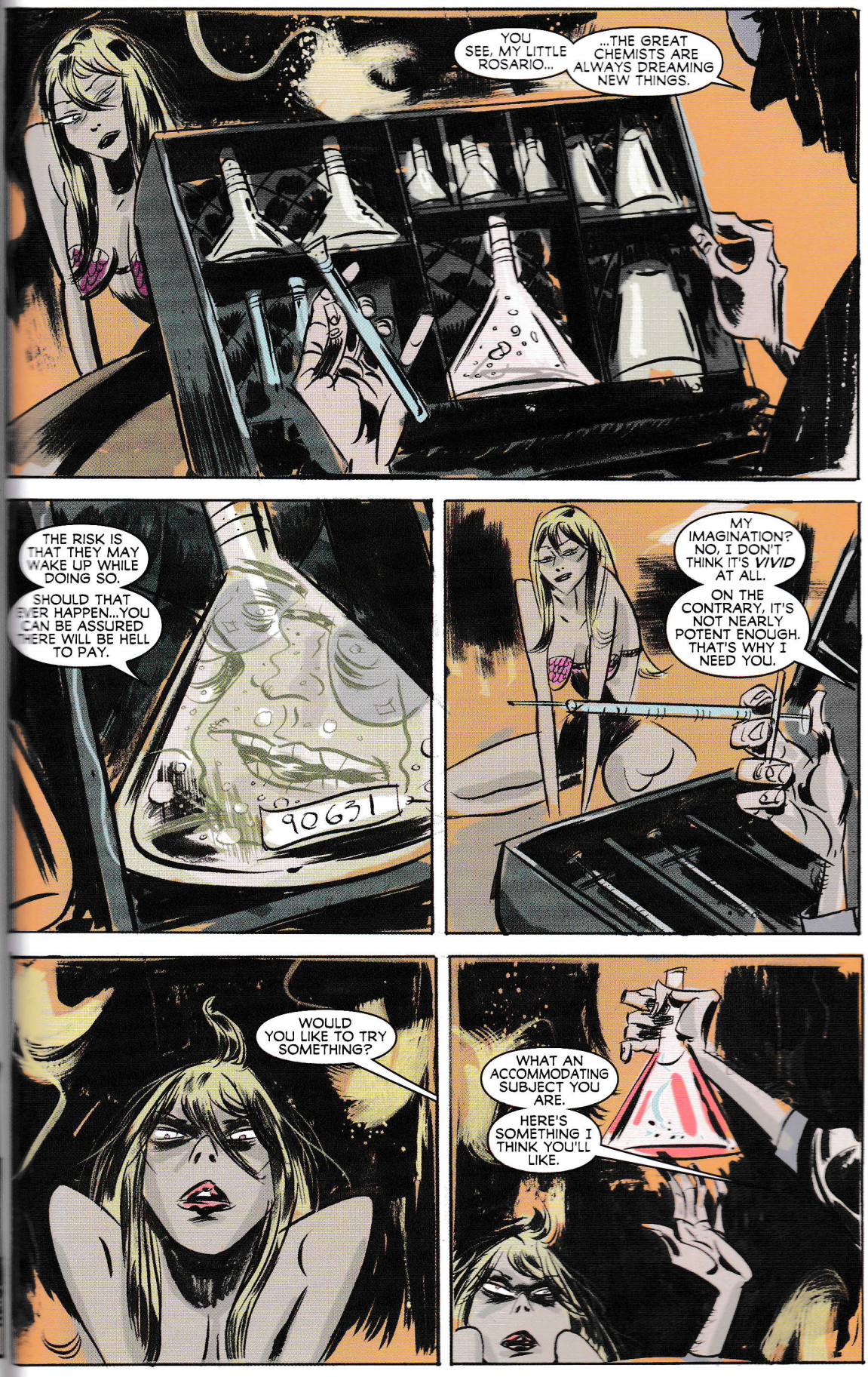

WELL! YOUR APARTMENT HAS A VERY NICE DOOR.
AND TONIGHT THAT DOOR IS VISIBLY DIFFERENT FROM ANY OTHER TIME YOU'VE SEEN IT.
DO YOU SEE WHAT I MEAN?
KEEP THE CEILING LIGHT OFF, PLEASE. I DON'T WANT TO SEE A REFLECTION OF THIS DOUR ROOM IN YOUR WINDOW.
ONE OF THOSE DIM LAMPS SHOULD GIVE US ALL THE LIGHT WE NEED.

YOU HAVE AN EXCELLENT VIEW OF THE CITY FROM HERE.
A PERSON CAN REALLY GET A GOOD LOOK AT ITS MANY MUTATIONS.

DOWN THERE, THE GREAT CHEMISTS WORK THEIR UNFATHOMABLE FORMULAS.
LOOK AT THOSE LIGHTS LINING THE AVENUES...THEIR LINES AND INTERCONNECTIONS...

...LIKE A SKELETON HOLDING UP A BODY OF TRANSFIGURING FLESH.
A GARDEN OF MONSTROUS ROSES.


WELL.
SHALL WE BEGIN?

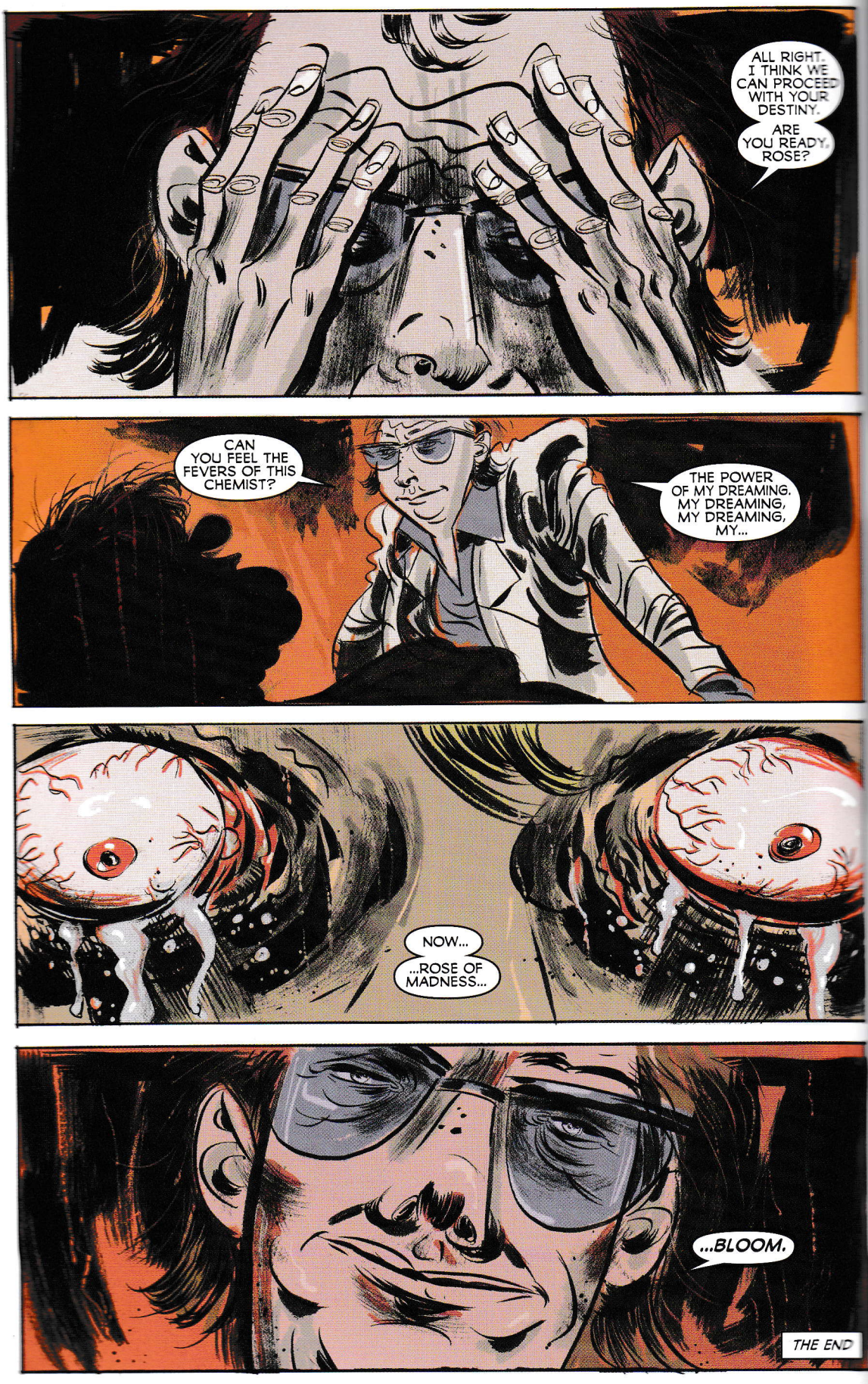

YOU SEE, MY LITTLE ROSARIO...
...THE GREAT CHEMISTS ARE ALWAYS DREAMING NEW THINGS.
THE RISK IS THAT THEY MAY WAKE UP WHILE DOING SO.
SHOULD THAT EVER HAPPEN...YOU CAN BE ASSURED THERE WILL BE HELL TO PAY.
90631
MY IMAGINATION? NO, I DON'T THINK IT'S *VIVID* AT ALL.
ON THE CONTRARY, IT'S NOT NEARLY POTENT ENOUGH. THAT'S WHY I NEED YOU.
WOULD YOU LIKE TO TRY SOMETHING?
WHAT AN ACCOMMODATING SUBJECT YOU ARE.
HERE'S SOMETHING I THINK YOU'LL LIKE.

NO, NO, YOU DON'T HAVE TO SNORT IT.
SEE, IT'S ALREADY DISSOLVED.
CALM DOWN. THE BURNING WILL SOON GO AWAY.
THERE'S NO POINT IN TRYING TO RUB THE CHEMICAL OFF YOUR HAND. IT'S IN YOUR SYSTEM NOW.
JUST LIE BACK. RELAX.
I HAVE TO GET SOMETHING ELSE.

DO YOU FEEL ANY EFFECTS YET?
KAPK
WHAT I MEAN IS:
DO YOU FEEL ANY EFFECTS BESIDES THE FACT THAT YOU CAN NO LONGER MOVE YOUR ARMS OR LEGS.
YOU SEE, MY RED RED ROSE...
...MY GLITTERING POWDER HAS NOW MADE POSSIBLE A VERY INTERESTING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN US.
TO PUT IT ROMANTICALLY, I'M NOW DREAMING YOU.
NOT DREAMING ABOUT YOU, AS IN SOME OLD LOVE SONG. I'M ACTUALLY DREAMING YOU.
YOUR ARMS AND LEGS DON'T WORK BECAUSE I'M DREAMING OF SOMEONE WHO IS AS STILL AS A STATUE.
I HOPE YOU CAN APPRECIATE HOW REMARKABLE THIS IS.

HMM. I SUPPOSE THAT WAS YOUR ATTEMPT TO SCREAM.
YOU REALLY ARE TERRIFIED, AREN'T YOU?
PERHAPS I'D BETTER DREAM OF SOMEONE WHO HASN'T ANYTHING TO SCREAM WITH.
THERE.
KqPK
THAT SHOULD DO IT.
NOT BAD. A SUITABLE "BEFORE" PICTURE.
BUT I SEE A QUESTION IN YOUR EYES.
"WHAT'S TO BECOME OF OLD ROSIE?"
I SUPPOSE IT'S ONLY FAIR THAT YOU SHOULD KNOW...

WE ARE PRESENTLY COMING INTO PERFECT TUNE WITH EACH OTHER... MY DREAM AND MY DREAM GIRL.
YOU ARE ABOUT TO BECOME THE FLESH AND BLOOD KALEIDOSCOPE OF MY IMAGINATION. YOUR FORM WILL KNOW NO VARIETY...
...FOR EVEN NOW THE GREAT CHEMISTS THEMSELVES ARE WORKING THROUGH ME.
THERE'S ONE PROBLEM WITH THE PROCESS, HOWEVER.
IT HASN'T REALLY BEEN PERFECTED YET.
THE ORIGINAL STRUCTURE OF THE SUBJECT BREAKS DOWN IN A WAY THAT EVEN I DON'T UNDERSTAND. BUT THE CONSEQUENCE IS SIMPLE: YOU CAN NEVER BE AS YOU ONCE WERE.
YOU'LL HAVE TO REMAIN IN WHATEVER CURIOUS INCARNATION YOU TAKE ON AT THE DREAM'S END.
I'M VERY SORRY ABOUT THAT. BUT DON'T WORRY.
YOU WON'T LIVE LONG AFTER I LEAVE HERE.


ALL RIGHT. I THINK WE CAN PROCEED WITH YOUR DESTINY.
ARE YOU READY, ROSE?
CAN YOU FEEL THE FEVERS OF THIS CHEMIST?
THE POWER OF MY DREAMING. MY DREAMING, MY DREAMING, MY...
NOW...
...ROSE OF MADNESS...
...BLOOM.
THE END

THE SECT OF THE IDIOT

Introduction

Although many people have written many things on the subject, we really have not completely defined what it means to be human. Arguably, one indication of being human is to have a "dread of being"—a dread not only of our own being but of being itself. A dread that the vacancy which we might otherwise have occupied is like a stall in a public lavatory of infinite dimensions, that there is a universe in which things are roving about simultaneously as we are roving about too. That everything exists in the way it seems to exist and that we are part of all being until we stop being.

Compared with nonbeing, with the purity of the uncreated, being in any of its incarnations is peculiar and uncanny. Whether something evolved naturally or was made by the digits and opposing thumbs of humanity, whether something is animate or inanimate, that something is peculiar and uncanny. Even the most unexceptional things may strike us in this way when inspected closely. In no time at all we come to recognize them as not belonging in this world or any other. They seem inessential parts of a creation—a creation that itself is inessential. They do not need to be how they are, or need to be at all. They take up space where no space had to be taken up. The longer our inspection of them lasts, the more unfamiliar they become, like words that are repeated until their meaning is lost.

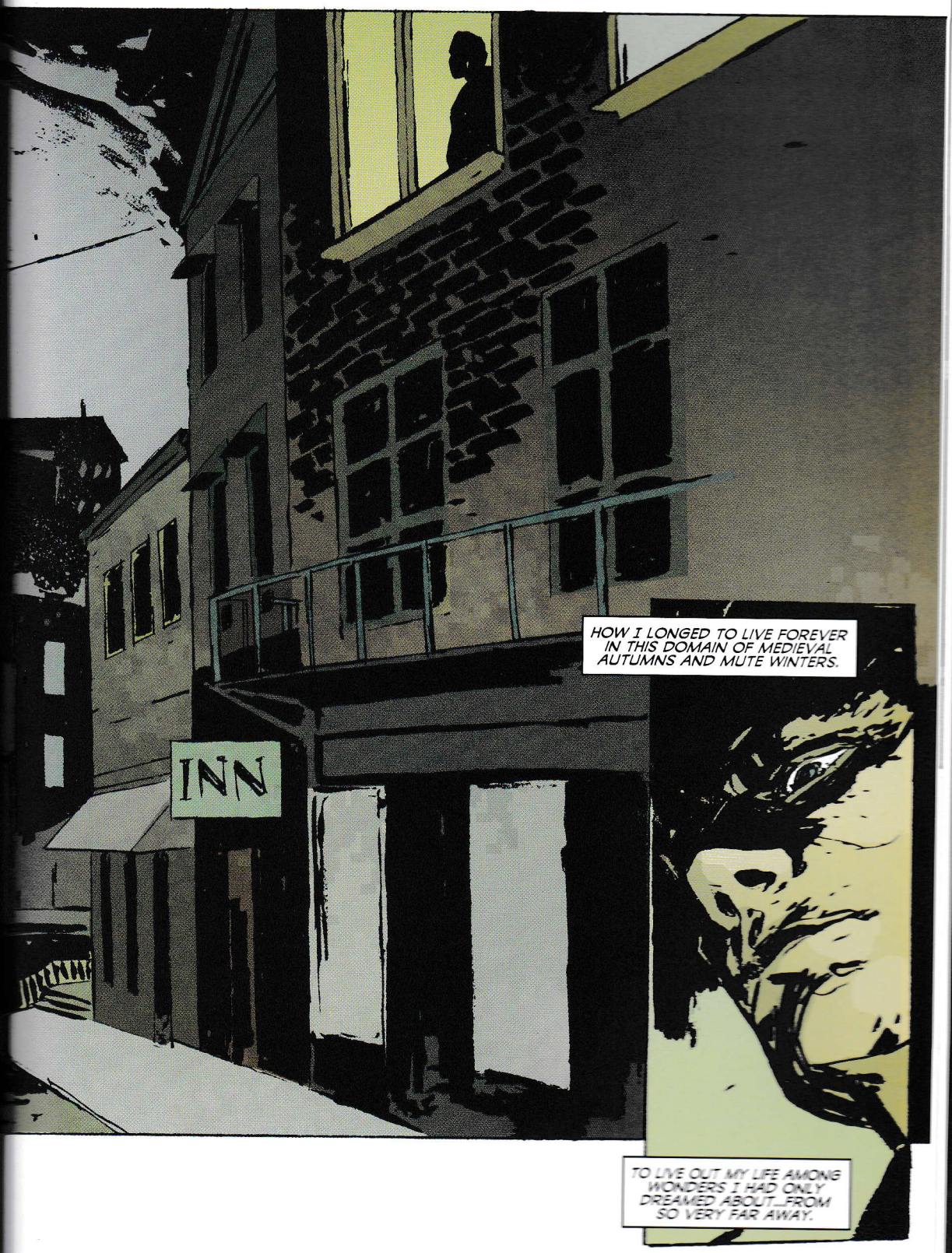
It's true, the most everyday objects may turn peculiar and uncanny if we focus on them long enough, as if they were functionless lumps of matter—questionable and alien. Some old shoes in a clothes closet catch your eye and appear as shapes you have never before pondered. Soon you are not as at ease with them as you once were. "What are those shapes?" you may ask as they confront you from the floor of that clothes closet. But before you can ask any more questions, you dial back your brain to a point at which everything seems normal again and the recognition returns. *That was close*, you think.

Now you can get on with your day. You select a pair of shoes to wear and sit down to put them on. It is then that you notice your stockinged feet . . . and the body to which they are connected . . . and the universe in which that body is roving about with so many other peculiar and uncanny things. Among these things are the beings that the main character of "The Sect of the Idiot" encounters. Like everyone else, he does not entirely know what it means to be human. But he does, upon close observation, learn what it means to be nonhuman. He also learns what it is to have a dread of being anything at all.

— J.L.

THE EXTRAORDINARY IS A PROVINCE OF THE SOLITARY SOUL...
...A MIRACULOUS HELL TOWARD WHICH ONE UNKNOWINGLY WANDERS.
AND ITS GATE, IN MY CASE...WAS AN OLD TOWN...
...WHOSE ALLEGIANCE TO THE UNREAL INSPIRED MY SOUL WITH A HOLY MADNESS.
SOON AFTER ARRIVING, I FOUND MYSELF IN A HIGH ROOM, OVERLOOKING THE IDEAL OF MY DREAMS THROUGH DIAMOND PANES.
HOW MANY TIMES HAD I ALREADY LINGERED HERE, IN MY MIND?
HAVING ROAMED THESE STREETS IN REVERIE...
...I COULD FINALLY BE ENVELOPED BY THEIR SENSUAL VISIONS...

...THE ENDLESS SERENITY CONVEYED BY THE OLD TOWN.

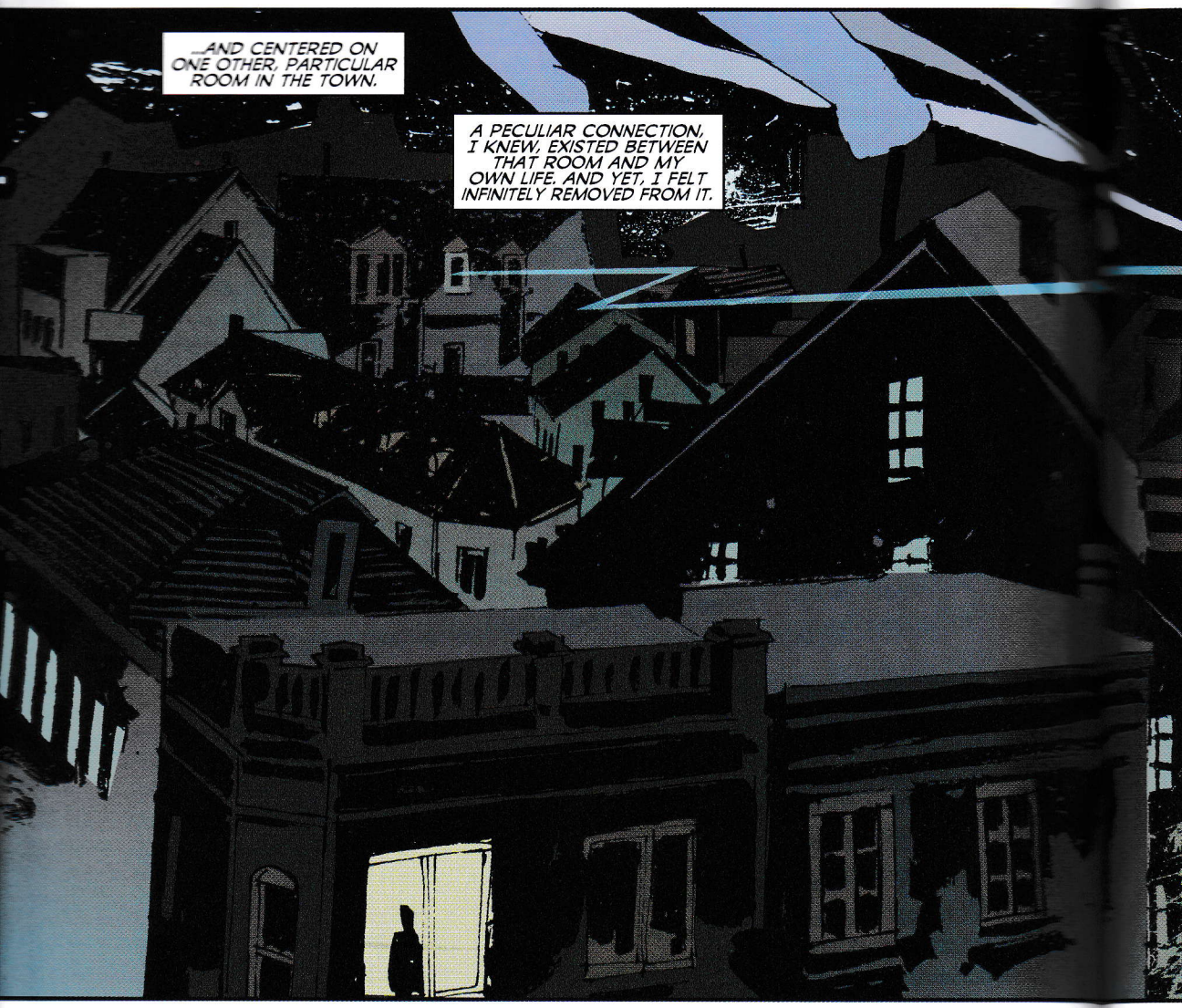

INN
HOW I LONGED TO LIVE FOREVER IN THIS DOMAIN OF MEDIEVAL AUTUMNS AND MUTE WINTERS.
TO LIVE OUT MY LIFE AMONG WONDERS I HAD ONLY DREAMED ABOUT...FROM SO VERY FAR AWAY.

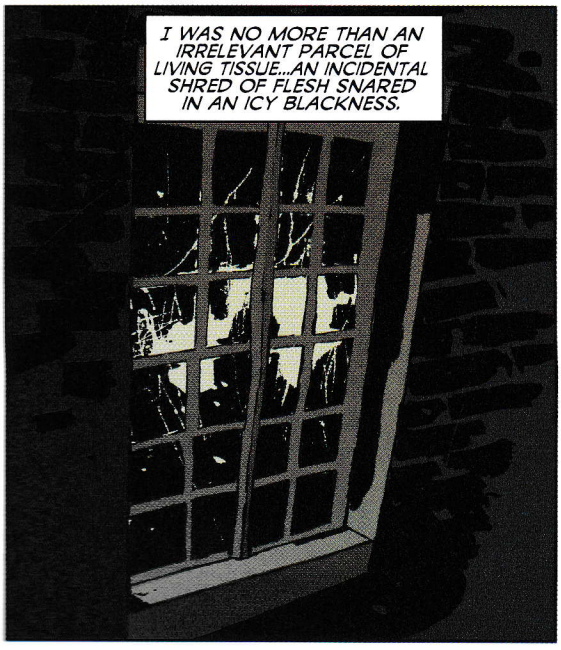
BUT NO EXISTENCE– HOWEVER VISIONARY– IS WITHOUT ITS TRIALS.
AFTER ONLY A FEW DAYS IN THE OLD TOWN, I FOUND MYSELF TROUBLED BY THE SOLITARY NATURE OF BOTH THE PLACE, AND OF MY OWN LIFE.
nok nok

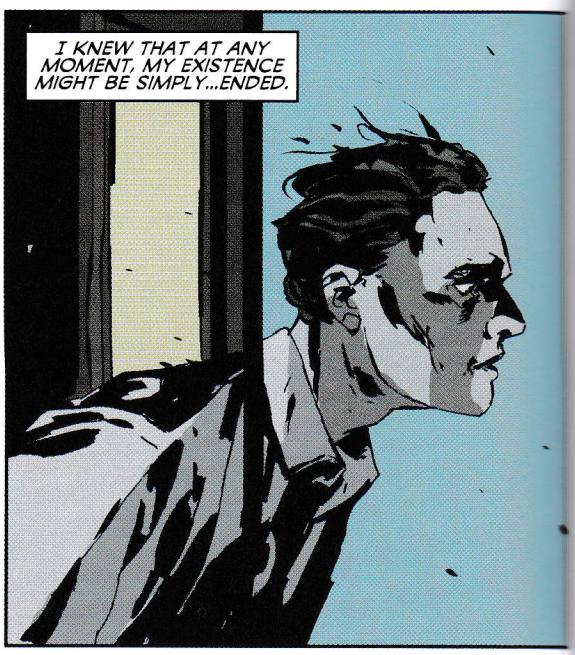
OH.
THIS IS EMBARRASSING.
I MUST HAVE BEEN GIVEN THE WRONG ADDRESS.
THE HANDWRITING ON THIS NOTE IS SUCH CHAOS...
BEAUTIFUL VIEW FROM YOUR ROOM, EH?
UH, YES.
IT IS...

FOOTSTEPS ON THE FLOORS BELOW.
tap
tap
tap
THE QUIET LANGUAGE OF OLD HOUSES.
THE REST OF THE DAY WAS UNEVENTFUL...THOUGH COLORED BY A WHOLE SPECTRUM OF IMAGININGS.
AND THAT NIGHT, I EXPERIENCED A VERY STRANGE DREAM.

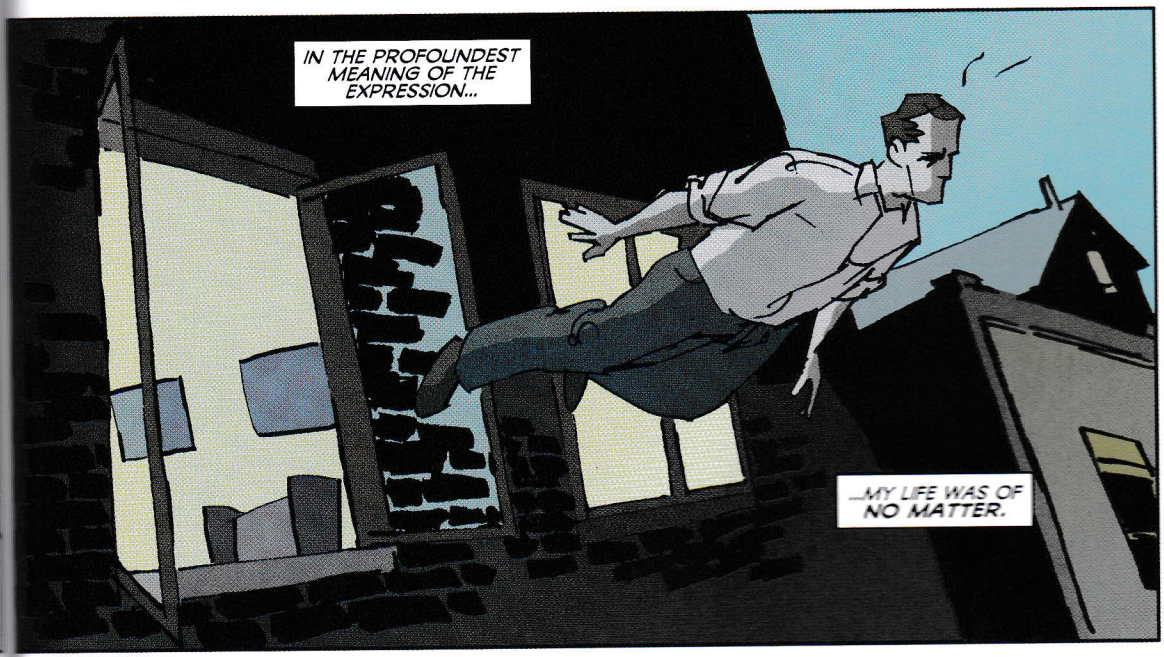
IN THIS DREAM...
...I OCCUPIED A SMALL, DARK ROOM...
...WHOSE WINDOWS LOOKED OUT ON A MAZE OF STREETS UNRAVELING BENEATH AN ABYSS OF STARS.
BUT BENEATH THOSE STARS, THE STREETS WERE BATHED IN A PERVASIVE, STALE-GRAY DIMNESS.
NEITHER NIGHT NOR DAY, NOR ANY NATURAL PHASE BETWEEN THEM.
GAZING OUT THE WINDOW, I SENSED THAT CRYPTIC PROCEEDINGS WERE TAKING PLACE.
VAGUE OBSERVANCES WHOLLY DIVORCED FROM REALITY...


...AND CENTERED ON ONE OTHER, PARTICULAR ROOM IN THE TOWN.
A PECULIAR CONNECTION, I KNEW, EXISTED BETWEEN THAT ROOM AND MY OWN LIFE. AND YET, I FELT INFINITELY REMOVED FROM IT.


I WAS NO MORE THAN AN IRRELEVANT PARCEL OF LIVING TISSUE...AN INCIDENTAL SHRED OF FLESH SNARED IN AN ICY BLACKNESS.


I KNEW THAT AT ANY MOMENT, MY EXISTENCE MIGHT BE SIMPLY...ENDED.

THIS VERY REMOTENESS FROM MY DREAM UNIVERSE...THIS FEELING OF HOMELESSNESS AMID A VAST, ALIEN ORDER...
...WAS SUDDENLY THE SOURCE OF UNNAMEABLE TERRORS.


IN THE PROFOUNDEST MEANING OF THE EXPRESSION...
...MY LIFE WAS OF NO MATTER.

THE CREATURES' MOVEMENTS-

-SUGGESTED VARIOUS, HIDEOUS ANALOGIES.

THE SPINNING LEGS OF SPIDERS.

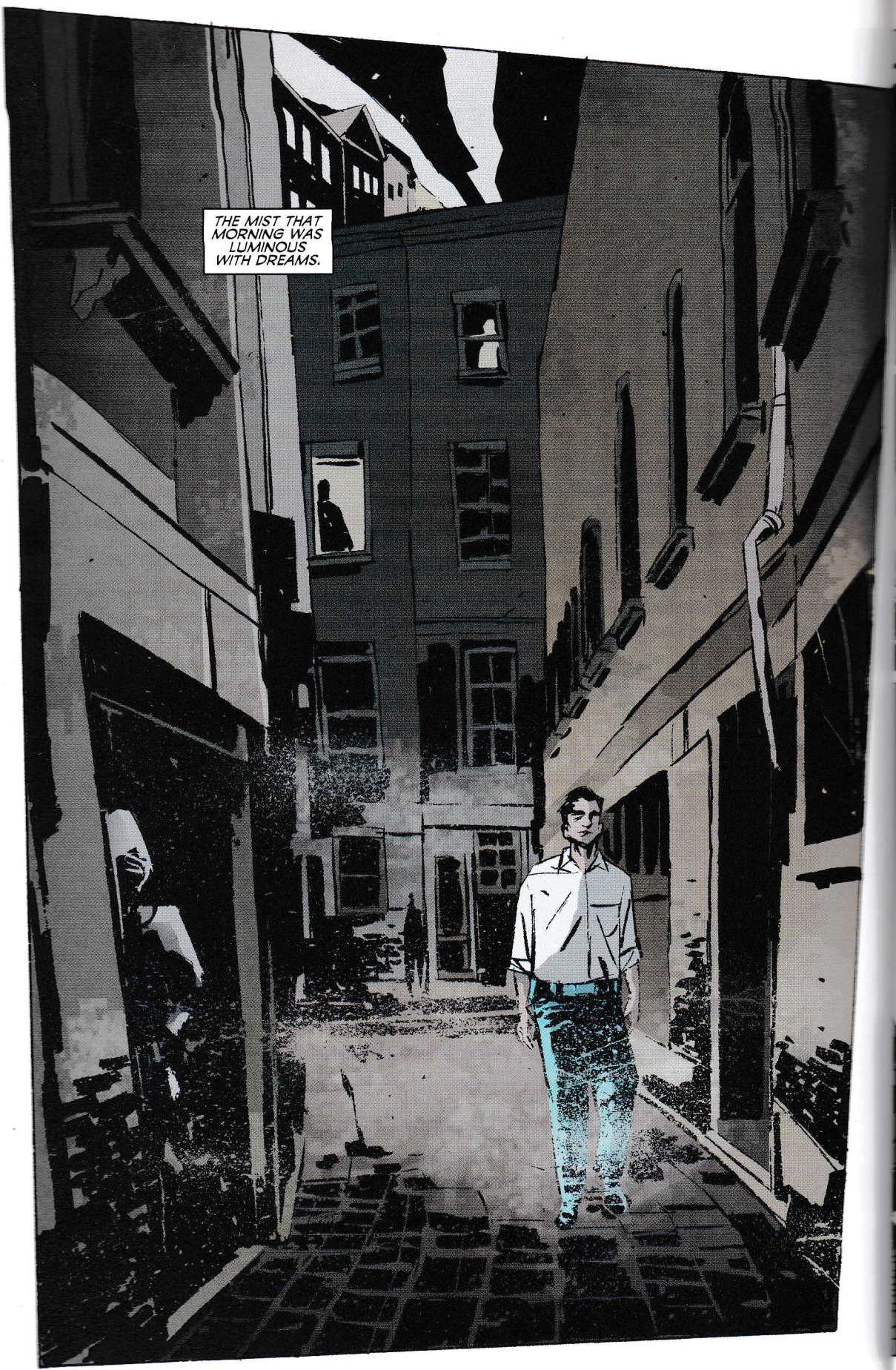
THE GREEDY RUBBING OF A FLY'S FEELERS.

THE RIPPLING OF A LIZARD'S TONGUE.

THE TWITCHING OF ITS TAIL.

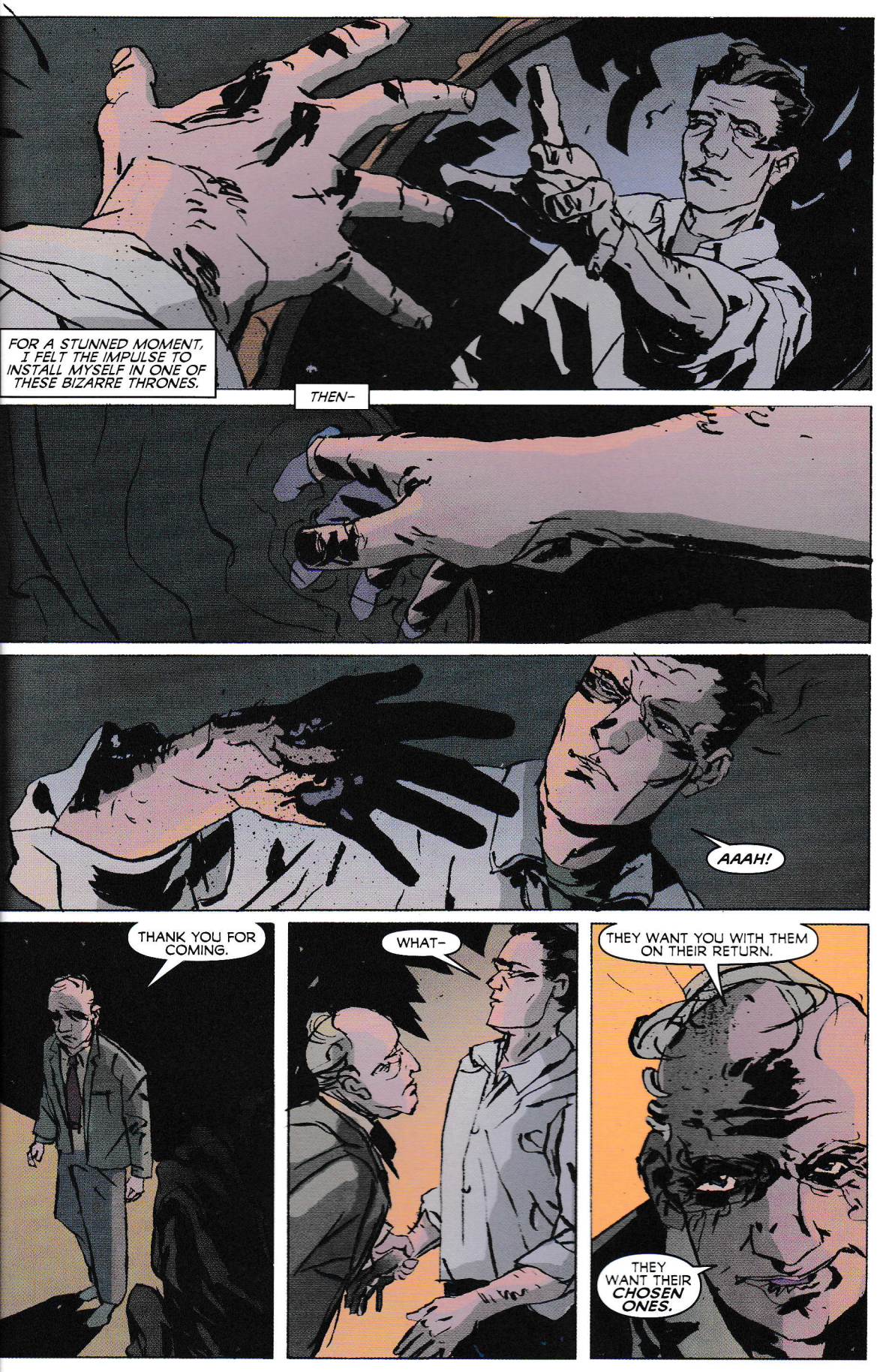
AND THEN, IN MY DREAMING MIND, I SAW A VISION OF THE WORLD ENTRANCED.
A PARADE OF BEINGS SLEEPWALKING TO THE MANIPULATIONS OF THEIR WHISPERING MASTERS...THOSE HOODED, CLOAKED FREAKS...
...WHO WERE THEMSELVES AMONG THE HYPNOTIZED.
FOR THERE WAS A POWER SUPERSEDING THEIRS. AN UNSEEN FORCE WHICH THEY, TOO, SERVED IN THEIR TURN.
WHY HAD THEY ALLOWED ME TO INTRUDE ON THEIR INFERNAL WISDOM?
WAS IT BY CALCULATION, OR SHEER ACCIDENT?

ON WAKING, IT SEEMED THAT I HAD CARRIED BACK WITH ME A TINY, JEWEL-LIKE PARTICLE OF HORRIFIC ECSTASY.
AND BY SOME ALCHEMY OF ASSOCIATION...
...THIS DARKLY CRYSTALLINE SUBSTANCE INFUSED ITS MAGIC INTO MY IMAGE OF THE OLD TOWN.
A PREVIOUSLY UNKNOWN ELEMENT SEEMED TO HAVE EMERGED IN THE TOWN'S COMPOSITION AND I FOUND MYSELF ODDLY DRAWN TO THE EVIL STIRRINGS BENEATH ITS SURFACE.
THE TOWN HELD MORE WONDERS THAN I KNEW, EVEN NOW...
...A SECRETED CACHE OF BLASPHEMOUS OFFERINGS.

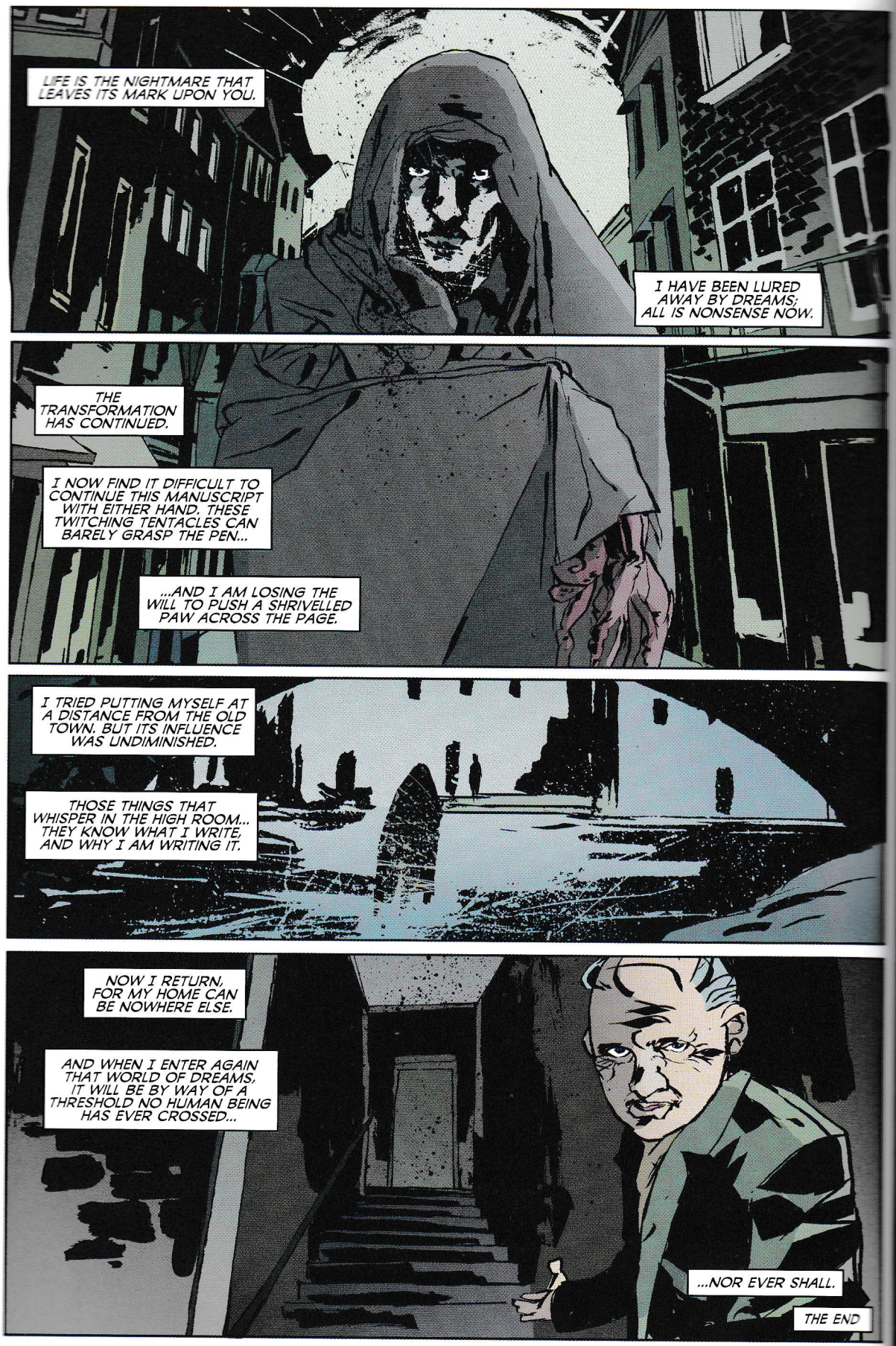

THE MIST THAT MORNING WAS LUMINOUS WITH DREAMS.

THE WHOLE DAY, I WANDERED IN A FEVERED EXALTATION THROUGH THE OLD TOWN. SEEING IT AS IF FOR THE FIRST TIME.
AND WHEN, AT LAST, I PASSED UNDER THE ARCH OF AN OLD STREET AND GAZED UP AT THE TOWERING STRUCTURE BEFORE ME...
...I WAS OVERWHELMED.
I RECOGNIZED THE BUILDING IMMEDIATELY.
LIKE MANY OF THOSE AROUND IT, IT SEEMED EMPTY. ABANDONED.
I ASCENDED THE STAIRS WITH A SOLEMN, MECHANICAL INTENTNESS...
...STOPPING ONLY WHEN I FOUND THE DOOR TO A CERTAIN ROOM.

AT FIRST, THAT ROOM APPEARED TO BE UNOCCUPIED.
THEN, AS MY EYES ADJUSTED TO THE CONFUSING TWILIGHT...
...I SAW THE CIRCLE OF CHAIRS.


FOR A STUNNED MOMENT, I FELT THE IMPULSE TO INSTALL MYSELF IN ONE OF THESE BIZARRE THRONES.
THEN–
AAAH!
THANK YOU FOR COMING.
WHAT–
THEY WANT YOU WITH THEM ON THEIR RETURN.
THEY WANT THEIR CHOSEN ONES.

LET GO!
LET GO OF MY HAND!
YOUR HAND?
YOUR HAND?
HA HA HAH HA HA HAHAHAHA HA
HA HA HAH HA HA HAHAHAHA


LIFE IS THE NIGHTMARE THAT LEAVES ITS MARK UPON YOU.
I HAVE BEEN LURED AWAY BY DREAMS; ALL IS NONSENSE NOW.
THE TRANSFORMATION HAS CONTINUED.
I NOW FIND IT DIFFICULT TO CONTINUE THIS MANUSCRIPT WITH EITHER HAND. THESE TWITCHING TENTACLES CAN BARELY GRASP THE PEN...
...AND I AM LOSING THE WILL TO PUSH A SHRIVELLED PAW ACROSS THE PAGE.
I TRIED PUTTING MYSELF AT A DISTANCE FROM THE OLD TOWN. BUT ITS INFLUENCE WAS UNDIMINISHED.
THOSE THINGS THAT WHISPER IN THE HIGH ROOM... THEY KNOW WHAT I WRITE, AND WHY I AM WRITING IT.
NOW I RETURN, FOR MY HOME CAN BE NOWHERE ELSE.
AND WHEN I ENTER AGAIN THAT WORLD OF DREAMS, IT WILL BE BY WAY OF A THRESHOLD NO HUMAN BEING HAS EVER CROSSED...
...NOR EVER SHALL.
THE END

THE NIGHTMARE FACTORY

Promotional Image by Tim Bradstreet

Timothy "Tim" Bradstreet is an artist and illustrator, best known for his work on comic books (covers and interiors), book covers, movie posters, role-playing games, and trading cards.

Bradstreet has been working professionally ever since he graduated high school in 1985. He is primarily self-taught, choosing instead of institutional training to begin shaping his talent under the tutelage of fellow illustrator Steve Venters at Fantasmagraphics. With Venters's guidance, Bradstreet began illustrating role-playing games, honing his skills while pursuing his long-time ambition to draw comics. In 1990, he got his big break, working with industry legend Timothy Truman on *Dragon Chiang*.

His work on role-playing games continued with GDW's Twilight 2000 and FASA's Shadowrun. Bradstreet's revolutionary work on White Wolf's Vampire: The Masquerade garnered him much critical praise and ensured his place in pop-culture history. This, in turn, led to the addition of many major comic book publishers to his clientele. He has since drawn for scores of comic-and game-related projects, including Activision's Vampire: Bloodlines video game, Dark Horse's *Hard Looks* and *Another Chance to Get It Right* (both with author Andrew Vachss), *Star Wars*, *Clive Barker's Age of Desire*, Marvel's *Punisher* and *Blade*, and Vertigo's *Gangland*, *Unknown Soldier*, *Human Target*, and *Hellblazer*. In 1997, Bradstreet was voted Best Artist by the International Horror Guild. He has also been nominated for the Eisner Award.

In 2000, he joined director Guillermo del Toro as a conceptual artist, helping work on the visual design for the film *Blade II*. In the fall of 2003 Bradstreet began working on a number of movie posters for the Marvel/Lions Gate film *The Punisher*.

Bradstreet has also been the regular cover artist for two books, Marvel's *Punisher* and Vertigo/DC's *Hellblazer*. He has created more than seventy covers for each series and has played an instrumental role in the development of both characters.

Bradstreet's style is a distinctive one, once described by him as "stylistic photo-realism." His work combines the use of posed photography with painstaking pencils, inks, and coloring.

THE NIGHTMARE FACTORY

Cover by Jon Foster

Born in Rhode Island in 1964, Jon Foster was inspired during his childhood by an eclectic mix of Godzilla movies, Dr. Seuss books, and paperbacks sporting Frank Frazetta covers to become one of today's most popular creators of fantasy and science-fiction art. As well as producing work for everyone from Wizards of the Coast to *National Geographic*, Foster teaches painting and illustration at the Rhode Island School of Design. Jon has provided cover art for books and comics, including *Star Wars*, *Forgotten Realms*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and *Hunter: The Age of Magic*. His comics work includes *JLA: Riddle of the Beast*. He has won numerous Spectrum Awards and is the subject of *r/evolution: The Art of Jon Foster* from Underwood Books. He lives in Providence, Rhode Island, with his menagerie of dogs and cats.

Biographies

THOMAS LIGOTTI was born in 1953 and is a horror writer whose works include the story collections *The Nightmare Factory* and *Songs of a Dead Dreamer*. The *Washington Post* called him "the best kept secret in contemporary horror fiction."

TOBY CYPRESS is an artist based in Los Angeles, where he is working on his latest project, the graphic novel *Rodd Racer*. His previous work includes *The Tourist*, *Killing Girl*, *Batman/Nightwing: Bloodborne* and *Predator: Homeworld*. In 1997, Toby graduated from the Joe Kubert School of Cartoon and Graphic Art, where he was awarded the Norman Maurer Scholarship. He also works as a storyboard artist/conceptual designer for clients including Nike and Tokyopop.

JOE HARRIS makes movies and writes comics, skewering the horror genre with tales of superheroes and the supernatural. As a screenwriter, Harris made his feature debut in 2003 with the Sony Pictures release *Darkness Falls*, based on *Tooth Fairy*, a short horror film he wrote and directed. *Darkness Falls* opened number one at the box office, debuted at number one on the DVD sales charts, and finds its way onto television every Halloween. *The Tripper*, the politically themed slasher film Harris cowrote with actor David Arquette, was released in 2007. His short film *Witchwise* played at dozens of horror and genre film festivals in 2007. As a comic book writer, Harris has launched new titles for both Marvel's *X-Men* and *Spider-Man* franchises, and has worked on *Batman, B.P.R.D.*, and other properties from DC Comics, Dark Horse, and Wildstorm. He is developing several original comics properties for release in 2009. Though he feels as though he's in Los Angeles all the time, Harris actually resides in New York City, where he was born and raised. He can be reached on his Web site at www.joeharris.net.

VASILIS LOLOS was born in Athens, Greece, in 1981. He spent his early years in space, where he honed his comic craft in zero gravity. Since his return to Earth, he has published several books, including *The Last Call* for Oni Press and *The Pirates of Coney Island*, with Rick Spears, for Image Comics, and a few short stories for Marvel. For more information see www.vasilislolos.com.

STUART MOORE has been a writer, a book editor, and an award-winning comics editor. His recent writing includes the original science-fiction series *Earthlight* (Tokyopop) and *PARA* (Penny-Farthing Press); *Iron Man*, *New Avengers/Transformers*, and *Wolverine* (Marvel); *Firestorm* and *Detective Comics* (DC Comics); the multicultural superhero team *The 99* (Teshkeel); the comics adaptation of the bestselling novel *Redwall* (Philomel/Penguin); *Transformers Spotlight: Ramjet* (IDW); and the prose novels *American Meat* and *Reality Bites* (Games Workshop). Stuart also serves as editor of the Virgin Comics/SciFi Channel comics line, whose launch title, *The Stranded*, is being developed as an upcoming television pilot. At DC Comics, Stuart was a founding editor of the acclaimed Vertigo imprint, where he won the Eisner Award for Best Editor in 1996 and the Don W. Thompson Award for Favorite Editor in 1999. He then edited the bestselling Marvel Knights comics line, before turning to writing full-time. Stuart lives in Brooklyn, New York.

BILL SIENKIEWICZ is a highly acclaimed visual artist best known for his unique and recognizable work on various comic books, notably Marvel's *Elektra: Assassin*, written by Frank Miller. Sienkiewicz often utilizes oil painting, collage, mimeograph, and other forms generally uncommon in comic books. His other comics include notable work on *Moon Knight*, *New Mutants*, *Big Numbers*, and *30 Days of Night: Beyond Barrow*. In addition to his work in comics, Sienkiewicz has also created record covers, among them RZA's *Bobby Digital in Stereo* (1998) and EPMD's *Business as Usual* (1990), and the art for the DVD *The Venture Bros.: Season One*. Sienkiewicz was nominated for an Emmy Award twice, in 1995 and 1996, for his production and character design on *Where in the World Is Carmen Sandiego?*. He is developing a feature film based on his comic *Stray Toasters*.

NICK STAKAL's love of old black-and-white horror and noir movies serves as inspiration when he puts brush to bristol. Some of Nick's recent and notable art contributions can be seen in Image Comics' *Strange Girl* and in his work as the ongoing artist for Dark Horse's *Criminal Macabre*, written by Steve Niles.

"THE EXTRAORDINARY IS A PROVINCE OF THE SOLITARY SOUL... A MIRACULOUS HELL TOWARD WHICH ONE UNKNOWINGLY WANDERS."

—from "THE SECT OF THE IDIOT"

The mind-bending universe of horror master Thomas Ligotti awaits in another graphic adaptation of his haunting work. Enter a sphere where bizarre gas station carnivals serve as the first stop on the road to oblivion, a malevolent puppet steals people's identities, a deranged chemist engages in horrific experiments, and nameless beings skulk about in a stone tower, waiting to envelop the unsuspecting into the nebulous reaches of unreality.

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